What is the 11+ and why do schools use it?
The 11+ is a test used by some schools and local authorities as part of their admissions process. Schools use the 11+ for two reasons. First, the demand for places in selective secondary schools is greater than the number of places available, so some form of selection is necessary. Schools select pupils on a range of factors, such as catchment area, siblings at the school and performance in the 11+. Secondly, schools use the 11+ to select children who are most likely to benefit from the style of education or specialisms offered by the school.

What are the 11+ tests like?
The 11+ consists of a single test or a series of tests, covering one or more of the following subjects: English, Maths, Non-Verbal Reasoning and Verbal Reasoning. Tests will vary because local authorities or individual schools decide which subjects to test, as well as the balance of question types within the tests. An authority or school may also choose to add their own questions to those from a test provider.

Most 11+ papers contain a Verbal Reasoning test as this has been proven to be the best predictor of future academic potential. A Verbal Reasoning test identifies the ability to think logically about written information and then use this skill to solve problems. Many selection tests will also include a Non-Verbal Reasoning test which tests problem-solving using pictures and shapes. English and Maths tests are less frequently used and are based mainly around curriculum content reached during the early part of Year 6.

How do I know the 11+ test is fair to all pupils?
With over 30 years’ experience in test development, we follow strict guidelines to ensure best practice is maintained. For example, each question is thoroughly trialled and validated on groups of pupils before being approved for use. This process also includes analysis for gender, cultural and social bias. The overall length of the test is important, too, bearing in mind that a test that is too short cannot be guaranteed to produce reliable results.

In the areas of verbal and non-verbal reasoning, a question must belong to an acknowledged question type. For example, a valid verbal reasoning question must not discriminate against children from a poor educational background as it is not a test of reading but one of basic reasoning processes. A pupil who is not currently achieving their potential in English can therefore still demonstrate their true ability in a Verbal Reasoning test.

Similarly, non-verbal questions must be written in such a way that a candidate does not need to read and produce formal English. This ensures that the questions are not biased to cultural and educational background.

What is the format of the tests?
Non-Verbal Reasoning and English tests are always in multiple-choice format. The vast majority of Verbal and Maths tests are multiple-choice, too, although a small number of authorities and schools require candidates to write their answers in a test booklet.
I understand that my child's test results will include a ‘Standard Age Score’. What does this mean?

The Standard Age Score (SAS) is a recognised benchmark against a national or local sample of students of the same age. It’s the best and fairest way to measure a child’s performance relative to the other children who took the test.

For a selective system like the 11+, we identify how well the entire group of candidates has performed. Then, by incorporating an age adjustment that is based on a tried and tested statistical model\(^1\), we take each child’s age into consideration when awarding a Standard Age Score. The SAS usually ranges from 69-141.

Standard Age Scores are adjusted to account for the exact age of the pupil – an important consideration given that the ages in a typical year group will vary by almost 12 months and that the oldest children will typically achieve higher scores than their younger counterparts. The SAS also provides a fair comparison between the different tests used, regardless of differences in test difficulty or length.

My child scored very highly in a school reasoning test. Why have they not been offered a grammar school place?

Tests such as the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) are nationally standardised. This means that a child’s results are compared against a very large sample from all children in the UK. However, in an 11+ test, results are compared solely against the scores achieved by other children applying to that school.

The standardised scores from an 11+ test therefore express your child’s results in relation to the test average, not the national average. Given that 11+ candidates are likely to have a higher average ability than the national population as a whole, then standardised scores from the 11+ tests will tend to be lower than scores for the same children on any nationally standardised reasoning test.

How can I help my child prepare?

To make the 11+ seem less intimidating, it helps to familiarise children with the style and format of the test. Tackling a practice paper under timed conditions gives children valuable experience of managing their time effectively. It can help them to develop an approach to the test that ensures they have enough time to answer every question.

A practice test score will also create a picture of your child’s strengths and weaknesses, giving you a clear understanding of how you can help them. Achieving a good score in a practice test can also boost a child’s confidence and reduce their anxiety in the run up to the examination.

I thought that the 11+ Maths tests covered topics taught in the national curriculum. Why did some questions cover areas that my child has not yet been taught?

The 11+ Maths tests are based around curriculum content reached within the early part of Year 6. Even so, some questions in the 11+ tests will be based on concepts taught in the classroom but will be at a more difficult level than children will have experienced in school. As a result, they will focus on your child’s skills in particular areas as much as on their existing knowledge, making some questions perhaps appear unfamiliar.

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