FREE PARENT GUIDE

Foundation or Higher? A Parent's Guide to GCSE Maths Tiers

PARENT GUIDE

By Ibrahim, maths tutor since 2018 · Updated October 2026

Every GCSE Maths student sits either the Foundation or the Higher tier. The choice decides which grades your child can get, so it is worth understanding before the school makes its decision.

The Two Tiers at a Glance

	Foundation Tier	Higher Tier
Grades available	Grades 1 to 5	Grades 4 to 9 (a grade 3 is allowed if a student only just misses a 4)
Content	Number, ratio, algebra basics, shape, probability and statistics	Everything on Foundation, plus harder algebra, trigonometry, graphs and proof
Exams	Three papers of 1 hour 30 minutes (two papers of 2 hours 15 minutes for Eduqas)	The same number of papers, on the same days
Best for	Students aiming for a secure grade 4 or 5	Students aiming for grade 6 or above

Grades 4 and 5 can be achieved on **either** tier. The difference is how they are reached. On Foundation, most questions are aimed at grades 1 to 5, so a grade 5 needs a high share of the marks. On Higher, a grade 4 or 5 usually needs a smaller share of the marks, but the questions are harder overall.

The Two Risks Every Parent Should Know

The Foundation Ceiling

The highest grade on Foundation is a 5. However well your child does on the day, they cannot get a 6. If a sixth form course asks for a 6 or 7 in maths, Foundation closes that door.

The Higher Tier Risk

On Higher, a student who narrowly misses a grade 4 can be awarded a 3. Below that, the result is a U (ungraded), with no grade at all. A student who would have got a solid 4 on Foundation can leave with nothing.

Who Decides, and When?

The school decides, usually based on mock exams (practice exams taken at school) and class tests in Year 10 and Year 11. Your child is then **entered** for one tier. For the summer 2027 exams, the entry deadline (the date by which schools must register each student) is **21 February 2027**. Schools can sometimes change the tier after that, but it usually costs a late fee, so most decisions are made around the January mocks.

You are allowed to ask questions and share what you know about your child. Teachers see your child in class; you see them at home, with homework, nerves and motivation. Both views matter.

How to Think About the Choice

If your child...	The usual advice
is regularly getting grade 6 or above on Higher papers	Higher. Foundation would cap them at a 5.
is getting grade 4 or 5 on Higher papers, with time to improve	Usually Higher, with focused practice on the grade 4 and 5 questions.
is scraping a 3 or 4 on Higher papers	Often Foundation. A safe 4 or 5 is better than risking a U (no grade).
is getting a high grade 5 on Foundation papers with time to spare	Worth discussing Higher with the teacher.
needs a 6 or 7 for A Level Maths or a science A Level	Higher is needed. Talk to the school early.

Remember that a grade 4 is the "standard pass" and a grade 5 is the "strong pass". Many college courses, apprenticeships and jobs ask for a 4, which is fully reachable on Foundation.

Questions to Ask Your Child's Maths Teacher

- Which tier are you planning to enter my child for, and why?
- What grade are they working at on that tier, and on the other one?
- Which topics are holding them back from the next grade?
- Is there still time to move tiers, and what would they need to show?
- What can we do at home that would help most between now and the exams?

What About IGCSE?

International GCSEs have tiers too. **Edexcel International GCSE** works like GCSE: Foundation gives grades 1 to 5 and Higher gives grades 4 to 9 (with a 3 allowed). **Cambridge IGCSE (0580)** calls its tiers Core and Extended and uses letter grades: Core gives grades C to G, and Extended gives grades A* to E.

What You Can Do This Week

- Ask your child which tier they think they are on. Many students are not sure.
- Look at their last mock paper together and find the grade written on it.
- Check the maths grade asked for by any sixth form or college course your child is interested in.
- If anything is unclear, email the maths teacher using the questions above.

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