What do standardised scores mean?

A Bell Curve – so called because it looks a little bit like a bell.

55   70   85   100   115   130   145
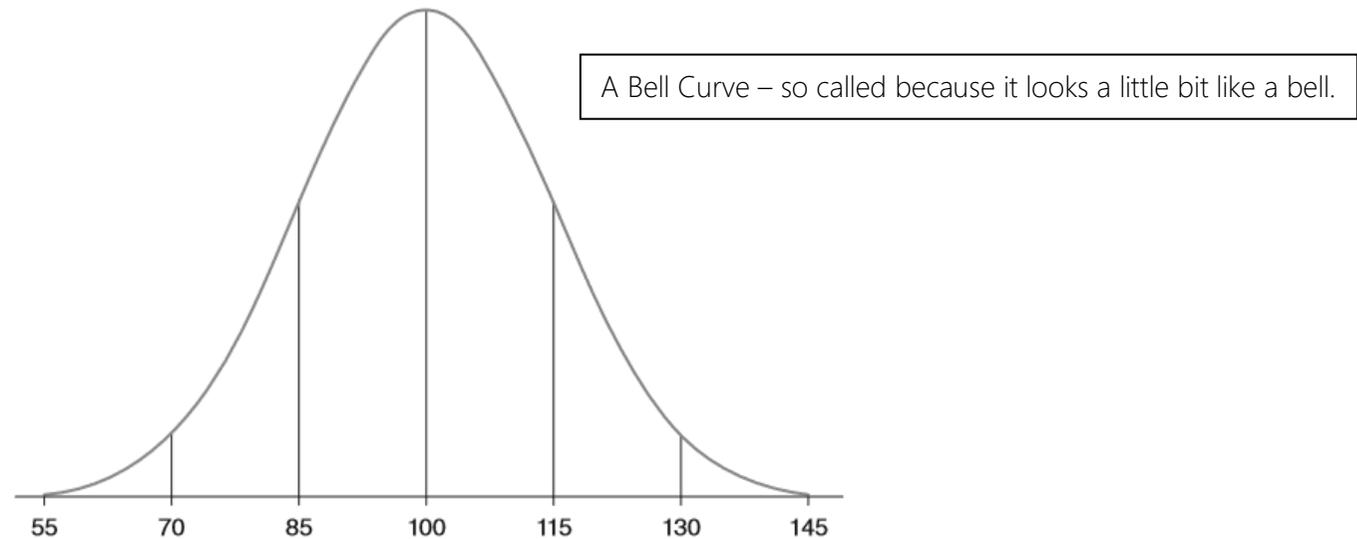
When we want to assess how someone compares to someone else their age, we use standardised scores to help us do this, often shown in a bell curve. Imagine that this picture above is filled with dots and that each dot is a person. Those dots which fall in the largest sections (between 85-115) represent the majority of people, which means that their scores are typical of the average in their age group. In education, we tend to compare skills to do with learning to understand a child's learning profile and whether they have difficulties compared to their peers. There are two perspectives to consider when looking at standardised scores.

Firstly, are there any scores which fall below 85? Some people consider scores below 90 to be notable, too. If there are any scores below 85, this suggests that the focus area of the test (reading accuracy, working memory etc) is an area of particular difficulty for that person and would benefit from support, because their score falls below that which is expected for that age group.

Secondly, does the overall profile of scores have a wide variation? For example, is the gap between the lowest score and the highest score wide (more than 15 standardised scores)? If so, this may suggest that the child's profile is a little spiky and they may have some specific difficulties.

Snapshot tests which give standardised scores are just results from one moment in time and scores can, and do, vary if tests are repeated – just like eye tests. This is why they are given confidence bands, which means that the score might be '87' but the true score falls somewhere between '80-94'. This gives a bit of flexibility as people can perform slightly differently on different days for any number of reasons. Scores can change over time, too, especially if interventions are put in place to support.

As a simple rule, if the score is 85 or below, this would be something that needs additional support/tuition/intervention. If a score falls above 115, this is an area of particular strength. Any score between 86-114 is within the average range and will not necessarily need specific support – although scores below 90 should be noted and monitored as a minimum.