

Knowing Third Graders



So you're about to teach third grade? You're in for a treat! As I talk to teachers all over the country, I keep hearing third grade teachers make statements like these:

- "I've been happily teaching third grade for twenty-five years!"
- "I've taught a bunch of different grades, and they're all great, but third grade is my favorite!"
- "It's been seventeen years now, and I still love third grade."

1

- I myself came to third grade after teaching both fourth and fifth grades for several years, and had heard my third grade colleagues make these kinds of statements many times. My mother taught third grade for twenty years and often made similar comments. I remember wondering as I got ready to teach third grade for the first time, "What's the big deal?"

And then the students arrived. Sure, as in any group of children, some held back and some seemed anxious, but by and large, the children who filled the room were notably gregarious and easygoing. As the year went on, I came to see that this enthusiasm and sunny outlook on life mark third grade for most children. Third graders tend to like school, and most are eager to get their hands on their next learning adventure.

My goal in this book is to share some essentials of setting up and running a classroom for third grade students. You'll find information on various aspects of how to manage a third grade classroom, including setting up the furniture, designing effective and fun projects, planning field trips, and developing strong relationships with families. Whether you're brand new to teaching or a veteran teacher who's changing grades, you'll find valuable information that will help make your teaching—and students' learning—joyful and engaging.

Know Where Students Are Developmentally

Research tells us, and teachers know from experience, that children change as they grow and develop. Just as children change in their physical characteristics (height, weight, fine and gross motor control, eyesight, etc.), so do they in their other characteristics (attention span, friendship preferences, sense of humor, and willingness to take risks are just a few examples). When we understand the characteristics common to third graders, we can design lessons, create classroom spaces, and group children in ways that will help them capitalize on their strengths.

Common Characteristics of Third Graders

2 So what stands out among third graders? Of course it's impossible to generalize, but one quality that tends to show up in third grade classes is positive energy. One third grade teacher described it this way: "Third graders are so enthusiastic, and they're willing to try just about anything. 'You want us to sing? Okay! You want us try dancing? Okay! We're going to put on a class play? Cool! Sounds like fun!' It's impossible not to be swept up by their positive energy and enthusiasm."

Interestingly, this same characteristic—unbounded enthusiasm—can also be third graders' greatest challenge. Buoyed by their increasing skills and blessed with seemingly unquenchable energy, third graders are often overly ambitious and tend to bite off more than they can chew. This ambitiousness, coupled with an attention span that often doesn't match their enthusiasm, can lead third graders into taking on big projects that they don't finish or into feeling frustrated and overwhelmed.

Here's a typical third grade scene: A group of students inside for recess on a snowy day decides that they're going to put on a comedy show for the class. With twenty minutes for recess, they feverishly began creating props and costumes for their show without ever actually writing skits or routines. They have just pulled out most of the art supplies for their props when it's time to

clean up. "Oooohhh!" they groan. "No fair!" For the next few days, the group keeps work-

Third graders are so enthusiastic, and they're willing to try just about anything.



ing at props and costumes (again, without any kind of plan for the show itself) until they get inspired to start a different project, leaving the unfinished props and costumes jumbled in a heap on a shelf.

This sometimes overwhelming enthusiasm is just one characteristic of third graders that it's helpful to know about. There are many others, and some of the most common are outlined on the table on pages 4–6. As you begin to explore the table, here are some important ideas to keep in mind:

- **Human development is complex.** Even scientists who study it do not fully agree on the means by which humans grow socially, emotionally, linguistically, or cognitively. Most theorists describe the process as a dynamic interaction between a person's biological disposition and many environmental factors—including the historical era in which a person grows up, the person's culture and family, and the institutions he or she encounters (such as schools, places of worship, and the media). The table is not intended to ignore this complexity but rather to offer you a bridge between the abstract ideas of theory and their practical expression in children's classroom behavior.
- **Every child is unique.** As a result of the complex and dynamic process of development, no two children—not even identical twins with the same genetic make-up—will develop in the same way or at the same rate. Also, within a given child, one area may develop at a much faster rate than another. For example, a particular third grader might have social-emotional behaviors very common among second graders (such as preferring to work alone or with one friend rather than with a large group) but cognitive behaviors more like those of a fourth grader (such as a greater ability to “read to learn” in content areas).
- **The table gives you a practical frame of reference.** It lets you prepare for teaching third graders and gives you a resource to check if something puzzling comes up. For instance, once you start teaching third grade, you may notice that many students' handwriting is messy on daily assignments, even though you've seen them do beautiful handwriting when they focus on it. Rather than expending a great deal of energy trying to figure out why they're writing that way or how to “fix it,” knowing how common this behavior is will allow you to focus your energy on other aspects of writing besides penmanship.

■ **The table is not about what’s “normal.”** Not all children will neatly fit the descriptions in this table. It’s not intended to limit your thinking about students’ potential, to support decisions about whether a student is “normal,” or to lead you to ignore the needs of students who differ from typical third graders. For example, although many third graders are eager to take on big and ambitious projects, you’ll often find some students who approach projects in a different way.



To learn more about child development, see the resources in the “About Child Development” section on page 114.

Third Graders

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Social-Emotional

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Enjoy socializing and working in groups. ■ Are generally easygoing. ■ Adjust well to change. ■ Enjoy larger friendship groups, preferably with same-gender friends. ■ Willing to take risks; usually recover quickly from mistakes or problems. ■ Concerned with fairness and justice; often have arguments and complaints about fairness issues. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Structure larger-group projects, but expect a mix of socializing and work. ■ Change groupings frequently and use other structures (for instance, whole-group games such as tag and soccer) to stretch children to work across gender lines and with a mix of classmates. ■ Expect enthusiasm for community-building projects and activities. ■ Be ready to help with arguments and complaints about fairness and justice. |
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Third Graders

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Physical

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Usually full of energy.■ Often hurrying.■ May move awkwardly.■ Can focus visually on both near and far.■ Tend to play hard and tire quickly.■ Have improving hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Give frequent, short movement breaks and incorporate movement into the curriculum throughout the day to boost concentration and productivity.■ Ask for “best” handwriting only on projects and posters, not daily assignments.■ Give time to practice handwriting, drawing, and crafts.■ Okay to have children do some copying from the board. |
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Cognitive

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Industrious and often overzealous, taking on more than they can handle.■ Have limited attention span but can become engrossed in an activity.■ Better at using manipulatives to explain their thinking and problem-solving.■ Usually care about process and product; eager for approval of peers and adults.■ Increasingly interested in logic, classification, and the way things work. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Give many short assignments and activities rather than a few long ones.■ Break assignments down into manageable parts.■ Give third graders opportunities to sort and organize, but realize they’ll often need your help.■ Display students’ in-process work as well as their final products.■ Include study of various cultures—highly enjoyable for third graders.■ Craft hands-on math and science lessons that help students grasp abstract concepts.■ For read-alouds, offer mysteries and other stories involving logic.■ If children become really engaged in a lesson or discussion, go with it if you can; most third graders can comfortably handle a change in plans. |
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Third Graders CONTINUED

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Language

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Vocabularies are growing quickly; many love to talk and explain ideas.■ Tend to exaggerate.■ Tend to listen well, but have so many ideas that they may not remember what they heard. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Leverage their love of talking by teaching skills required for conferring in groups, talking with partners, and sharing reflections on their work.■ Keep social and academic conferences short, with bite-sized teaching points.■ Invite them to write tall tales and poems using exaggeration, along with nonfiction about what they're learning in social studies and science. |
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6

The information in this chart is based on *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4–14*, 3rd ed., by Chip Wood (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2007), and is consistent with the following sources:

Child Development Guide by the Center for Development of Human Services, SUNY, Buffalo State College. WWW.BSC-CDHS.ORG/FOSTERPARENTTRAINING/PDFS/CHILDEVELGUIDE.PDF

"The Child in the Elementary School" by Frederick C. Howe, *Child Study Journal*, Vol. 23, Issue 4. 1993.

Your Child: Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive Development from Birth through Preadolescence by AACAP (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) and David Pruitt. Harper Paperbacks. 2000.

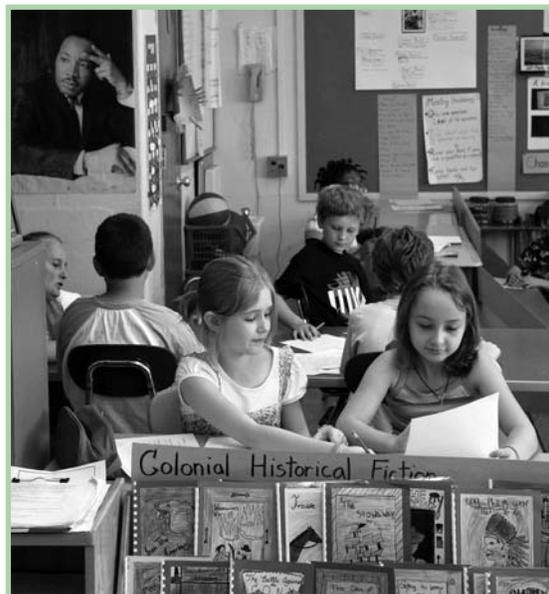
What about Developmentally Younger and Older Third Graders?

Just as every child follows his or her own developmental path, you'll likely find that despite the broad similarities among third grade classes, each class has a somewhat different developmental feel. You'll certainly have children each year who seem or actually are on the young or old side for third graders, and these students may tend to display characteristics common of either second or fourth graders. Here's just a sampling of some of these characteristics, along with a few practical suggestions for how you might adjust your teaching accordingly.

Younger third graders may:

- **Dislike taking risks and making mistakes.** Keep activities low-key and noncompetitive. Younger third graders may be concerned with making their work perfect. Have an ample supply of erasers on hand!
- **Focus eyes on small things up close and struggle to see things far away.** Avoid having students read lots of text or copy lengthy directions from the board.
- **Tend to enjoy smaller work and friendship groups.** When planning cooperative tasks, keep groups small. Be ready to help students meet and greet new students to help expand friendship circles.
- **Want to check in with the teacher frequently.** Allow lots of short check-ins while students are working. Plan for ways students can check in with you throughout lessons and work periods.

If you have developmentally or chronologically older students, they may display many characteristics more commonly seen in fourth grade. The next page provides a few examples and implications for your teaching.



Older third graders may:

- **Seem overly competitive.** Use activities and language that encourage cooperation over competition. Watch competitive games carefully for excessive competitiveness and criticism of classmates.



8

- **Have longer attention spans.** Allow students to run with a great idea—a research project, a fun book project, a movie script—and be there to support and scaffold their work.
- **Seem overly anxious.** Keep things light and easygoing to help students avoid taking things too seriously. Testing can be especially stressful—avoid heaping on lots of pressure to “do your best.”

- **Push themselves to physical limits.** Offer lots of short breaks and chances to move throughout the day. Balance periods of intense work and play with read-alouds, energizers, and fun games.

How to Use This Book

You might choose to use this book in a couple of ways. For example, you may:

- **Read cover to cover.** Maybe you’re reading this book during the summer before you teach third grade and you have time to read it from beginning to end. Doing that will give you a broad foundation for how to set up and run an effective third grade classroom. You might take notes as you go, or even use your plan book to make specific notes about how to arrange the classroom or set up the schedule at the beginning of the year.

- **Zero in on something specific.** Perhaps you just got your assignment to teach third grade, and the first day of school is a few days away. You don't have much time, and you need to arrange the classroom furniture. Or you may be in the middle of the school year and a particular challenge may have appeared (perhaps around communicating with parents about homework or how to structure a big project effectively). Flip right to the appropriate chapter and skim through until you find what you need. You can always go back and browse the rest of the book when you have more time.

Regardless of how you use this book, consider implementing new ideas slowly. Making too many changes or setting too many goals all at once is likely to end up in failure. Try one or two new things at a time and get comfortable with them before moving on to new changes. Don't worry about making mistakes. The best teachers are also the best learners—ones who try new ideas, make some mistakes, learn from them, and try new ideas again.

Last Word

9

Third grade is such a fun grade to teach—third graders' enthusiasm is contagious! My son, Ethan, illustrates this perfectly. When he was in second grade, he posted a sign on his bedroom door. Written in large red block letters, it read, "Stay Out!" For those who did make it in, he had posted lists of rules throughout the room about what they could and couldn't do. But at some point as a third grader, things changed. Down came the rules, and he replaced his "Stay Out" sign with a new one: "Welcome!"—written in multi-colored markers with birds and hearts decorating the border.

Is it any wonder that third grade teachers so enjoy teaching?