

Knowing First Graders



First graders often come to school brimming over with enthusiasm and excitement for learning, life, friends, and interests. Theirs is an age commonly marked by tremendous growth, lost teeth, great emotional highs, and, less frequently, some pretty low lows. First graders make big plans, jump into projects with both feet, work at a breakneck pace, and don't want to miss a thing.

- My first field trip with first graders was a trip to a local apple orchard. Students examined trees, saw how they were planted, and worked in small groups with parents to pick apples. They all returned with their own small sack. Back at school, we cut apples open and counted seeds in each apple. We compared whether all had the same amount. Some students wanted to plant their seeds, so we quickly rounded up some containers of dirt to do this. With parent volunteers, we proceeded to make miniature apple pies, reading recipes and noting how the apples changed in the cooking process. By the end of the day, the parents and I were completely exhausted but feeling pretty satisfied with all of the activities we had managed to pack in. And then, one first grader piped up: "Is that *it*? What else are we going to do?"

First graders' enthusiasm for school and life can be exhausting but infectious, and teaching them is an exciting and joyful experience (although you *will* need a great deal of energy!). But sometimes first graders' enthusiasm and gusto can make them bite off more than they can chew. They frequently have unrealistic expectations which, when unfulfilled, can crush them with disappointment. (I had to learn to help them realize exactly what we do on field trips before we left to stave off the "Is that it?" disappointment.) Many also experience a great deal of crashing and burning, falling into exhaustion after big spurts of speedy effort.

But this is where you come in! You can help first graders realize their grand ideas by breaking the ideas into manageable parts: “You want to write a book about dinosaurs? Okay, let’s give each dinosaur you know its own page....” When their plans are a little too grandiose, you can gently bring them back to reality: “I don’t think we can have elephants and a circus tent at our end-of-the-year party, but let’s think about some other things we could do around a circus theme.” You can pace the day so that they don’t use up all their energy early and run out of gas for the rest of the day.

I wrote this book to give you strategies for making the most of first graders’ common strengths and challenges. You’ll find information about many wide-ranging topics, such as scheduling your day, establishing and maintaining a first grade community, handling field trips and other special events, and communicating with parents. Whether you’re a new teacher or a teacher switching into first grade, you’ll find plenty of strategies and tips in this book to support you and your students.

2

Begin with Understanding Students’ Development

Knowing the students we teach is crucial to being a caring and effective teacher. Even though it’s most important to know all the children as individuals—their likes and dislikes, areas of strength, teaching and learning strategies that seem to work best for them—we also need to know generally what to expect from students in this grade so that we can prepare effectively for the year. That means we need to know some of the common characteristics of first graders—for instance, many first graders rush through work, have a competitive streak, and are unduly susceptible to criticism. With this knowledge, we can plan events and assignments that will be engaging and challenging but not overwhelming for them, anticipate which books they’ll need in their classroom library, and start the year with appropriate furniture and supplies.

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Knowing common traits will also give us a place to start if we see or suspect a problem.

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Knowing first graders' unique characteristics also helps immensely in working with parents. For example, first grade parents often worry about how fast their children work. A common refrain is "I don't know why Amy can't slow down. When she does, she's capable of beautiful handwriting, and she doesn't make so many mistakes. Why don't you make her redo all of her work until she learns to take her time?" But parents may find it helpful to know that many first graders share this tendency to rush through work, and most soon grow out of this phase. Because they can also be highly sensitive to criticism, asking them too frequently to redo their work not only tends to have little effect on their speed but also makes them question their abilities. Once parents understand that rushing is typical of many first graders, they are usually more open to suggestions for other ways to help their children balance the tendency to rush with the need for quality standards for school work.

Common Characteristics of First Graders

Of course, first graders have many other characteristics besides being enthusiastic, ambitious, and speedy, and the table on pages 5 and 6 summarizes these other common characteristics. As you use this table, keep these points in mind:

3

- **Human development is complex.** Even scientists who study it do not yet fully agree on the means by which humans grow socially, emotionally, linguistically, or cognitively. Most theorists describe the process as involving a dynamic interaction between a person's biological disposition and many other 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 first grader might have social-emotional

behaviors very common among first graders (such as bossiness) but cognitive behaviors more like those of a second grader (such as caring about and trying hard to maintain a high standard of work).



■ **The table gives you a practical frame of reference.**

For instance, as you will see in the table, many first graders have difficulty staying in their chairs. Teachers who are not aware of this tendency may incorrectly conclude something is wrong with a child who is regularly falling out of his chair. The table is a resource to which you can return if you see a behavior that seems puzzling. You may learn that the behavior is actually fairly common.

4

- **The table is not about what's "normal."** 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 other first graders. For example, although many first graders are quite social, talkative, and energetic, you will no doubt encounter quieter, more reserved, and less active students as well. Rather than assuming anything is wrong with these quieter children, think about how you may need to interact with them differently—for instance, by seeking them out more and initiating more conversations with them than with other students. By all means, go with what you see and give students what they need.

To learn more about child development, see the resources in the "About Child Development" section on page 122.

First Graders

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Social-Emotional

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Are enthusiastic, energetic, and competitive.■ Are very social; may start having a best friend.■ Thrive on encouragement and are often crushed by even small criticisms.■ Can be bossy.■ May begin to test the limits of authority. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Provide lots of noncompetitive, cooperative games and activities.■ Require students to be quiet only when it's absolutely necessary, and then keep the duration short.■ Reinforce students' positive attributes or behaviors rather than focus on mistakes.■ Be understanding of their testing behaviors and bossiness with friends while providing direct guidance and firm limits. |
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Physical

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Are very noisy and active; often fall out of chairs and may need to work standing.■ Can tire easily and get sick frequently.■ Love playing outdoors and in the gym.■ Are better at tracking from left to right than younger children; this is an ideal age for learning to read.■ May like to chew on pencils and other objects because new teeth are coming in. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Give frequent movement breaks; incorporate movement into the daily curriculum (this helps students stay focused).■ Give students space to spread out their work if possible. Let them work standing up or on the floor.■ Use interactive modeling (see pages 38–43) to show students what to do if they fall out of a chair.■ Vary the pace of instruction (quick opening lesson in a circle, back to desks for a focused assignment, return to circle for a discussion) and keep assignments short (5–10 minutes at the beginning of the year).■ Consider having frequent healthy snacks that satisfy students' hunger and chewing urge. |
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5

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First Graders CONTINUED

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Cognitive

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are more engaged in process than products. ■ Are very interested in learning and doing “work,” but sometimes take on projects that are too big for them. ■ Experience an explosion in artistic interest and expression; love to color and paint. ■ Are beginning to be able to conceptualize past and present and cause and effect. ■ Engage in more elaborate dramatic play. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Break activities, assignments, and projects into small, doable chunks. ■ Weave art into as many aspects of the curriculum as possible; provide a wide variety of art materials for exploration. ■ Provide lots of opportunities for imaginative and dramatic play both in the classroom and at recess. |
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Language

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Love poems, riddles, and songs. ■ Enjoy explaining their thoughts, how something happened, how things work. ■ Ask many questions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Weave poems, riddles, and songs into many parts of the day. ■ Provide many opportunities for students to talk and explain their thinking. |
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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 in *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 First Graders?

Your class will likely contain children with a wide range of chronological ages—children with earlier and later birthdays—as well as children who do not share the common first grade characteristics regardless of where their birthdays fall. These chronologically or developmentally younger students may demonstrate characteristics more like those of kindergartners. Here are some examples of such characteristics and how you might adjust your teaching for these children. Developmentally younger first graders may:

- **Need a great deal of adult approval and like to ask permission.** Give frequent positive reinforcement to all students, check in with students often to make sure they understand directions, and point out students' successes with being independent.
- **Like to repeat experiences and copy previous products.** Reinforce their efforts, but gently nudge them into trying new things and reassure them that mistakes are okay.
- **Struggle with printing.** For instance, they often start in the middle of the line or page, reverse letters and numbers, and space letters and numbers too closely on the page. Provide support and scaffolding for students. You could place dots on the paper to show them where to start writing, give them an object such as a Popsicle stick to mark spaces, or remind them to use their fingers to space between words. It may also help to display examples of good handwriting.



7

In contrast, some other students in your class might demonstrate characteristics more like those of second graders. These students may:

- **Dislike taking risks and making mistakes.** Present them with new situations and challenges, but prepare them by letting them know what to expect and what strengths they have that they can call upon to overcome the challenges.

- **Like working and playing alone or with one friend.** They may find group work overwhelming. Allow these students to work or sit in pairs as often as possible or provide them with options of quiet places to work.
- **Enjoy one-on-one conversations, especially with adults.** Check in frequently with these students and find time to talk with them at lunch or recess or during other free periods.
- **Try hard to make their work perfect.** Give them shorter, more manageable assignments and help them have more realistic expectations for their work.

How to Use This Book

You can use this book in various ways. For example:

- **Read cover to cover.** If you have time and already know you'll be teaching first grade in the coming year, you may want to read the book from beginning to end to get an overview of how to set up and run the classroom. You may want to take notes or mark key passages to return to later.
- **Right now all I want to know is...** Maybe you're already in the middle of the year, or you just found out that you'll be teaching first grade and you have only a few days to get ready. If you don't have time to read the whole book, zero in on what will help you immediately. Perhaps



a feeling of community is lacking in the room—in that case, go to Chapter 3, “Building Community,” on page 57. Or maybe you want to be sure you establish routines and procedures so that the classroom runs smoothly. If so, you could turn to Chapter 2, “Schedules and Routines,” on page 33. Read what you need, and then return to the other chapters later when you have more time.

Whichever way you choose, implement the strategies at a pace that feels comfortable for you. Try out the suggestions that best fit your goals and style and that will help you most immediately. Then, as those suggestions become an automatic part of your repertoire, come back to this book and add more ideas and practices. Some things may not work right away, or you may make mistakes—all teachers do, myself included. But remember that those missteps sometimes lead to our best learning, while modeling for students what real learning looks like.

Last Word

I have been teaching so long that some of my earliest first graders have now graduated from college—and at least one has become a teacher herself. Many stay in touch, and I am curious to know what they remember about their first grade year. Most remember the special events we had, learning to read, laughing a great deal, and talking. One student reminded me how he used to begin a conversation with me at lunch and keep talking even when I had to go check on someone else. Another told me how much it meant to him to have the freedom to write frequently about whatever he wanted—and that I responded so positively to his stories even though, looking back on them, he sees that they were somewhat wild, messy, and far-fetched.

These “old” first graders help me keep my eye on what really matters amid the clamor of testing requirements, schedules, and the other day-to-day demands of teaching. Our first graders need us to give them the space to be themselves while still gently nudging them toward growth. They need us to build in the special moments, events, and surprises they crave. They need us to see their strengths and help them build on those. It is an exhilarating year to teach—no one forgets their great first grade teacher!