

# Knowing Kindergartners



**T**here's something about kindergartners that makes teaching them a joy. Even the most sophisticated and worldly-wise kindergartner has a unique innocence and devotion to learning. I discovered this with pleasant surprise the first year I taught this grade. I will never forget the children's delight as the seeds they had planted sprouted into plants. Or their rapt attention as I read them stories. Or their intense concentration during a math lesson about telling time.

During the time lesson, I asked these eager students to look at the clock and say what they noticed—they took the assignment so seriously, pointing out things that after forty-plus years of life I had never much noticed. (“I noticed that the second hand kind of gets stuck every time it passes the minute hand, but only really fast!” “I noticed that the minute hand doesn't point straight to the dot!”) They were equally observant during other “noticings,” and so happy about every new book, theme, letter, math concept, and science project.

Kindergartners can soak in so much information and learn skills so quickly. One kindergartner I taught began school knowing no alphabet letters, being able to count only to ten, and knowing no one in our class. Two months later, she knew all of her letters and sounds, could count to fifty, and had befriended many classmates. By midyear, she was reading simple books, decoding CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words, such as *cat* and *dog*, adding and subtracting simple numbers, and acting as a classroom leader! Although her trajectory was a bit extraordinary, most kindergartners do make rapid and rewarding progress during the year.

Of course, kindergartners don't make these leaps and bounds all on their own. In fact, they need a special kind of adult support and guidance. With

their literal interpretation of the world, unfamiliarity with school culture, and dependence upon adults, kindergartners need highly skilled and loving teachers. They benefit from teachers who plan activities that are concrete and interactive, give clear directions, and are well prepared to react calmly—to anything that might come up. These teaching skills help children of all ages, but they are critical for teaching kindergartners effectively.

I actually thought I was pretty strong in these areas . . . and then I was moved from second grade to kindergarten. This happened during the school year with only a weekend's notice. I didn't have time to research what to expect, and my first days of teaching kindergarten showed it—those days were challenging both for the children and for me.

I gave the children too many directions and was frustrated when they didn't follow through. I was unprepared for the avalanche of children leaving their seats during work time to ask me, "Should I use blue here?" or "Can I go to the bathroom?" I was taken aback when a few kindergartners cried at what I considered minor setbacks (in second grade, crying usually indicated a more serious issue). And I was surprised when some children did not know how to use materials that I considered basic for this age group. But once I learned more about kindergartners and how to give them what they needed, I discovered how rewarding teaching this grade can be.

I wrote this book to help you get off to a good start teaching kindergarten. In it, I provide you with some ways to build upon kindergartners' strengths while also helping them overcome some of their challenges. For instance, I address how to schedule a kindergarten day (or half day), how to help kindergartners adjust to school and form a bond with you and their classmates, and how to successfully work with kindergarten parents. The book will help you whether you're new to teaching or have taught kindergarten before. Enjoy the journey!



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## Understanding Children’s Development

As I learned when I took on my first kindergarten class, all teachers, even those with experience in other grades, need to understand and appreciate what is unique about each particular grade, especially kindergarten. Although each kindergartner is of course an individual, many share some general developmental characteristics. Knowing these general traits and abilities can give you a starting point for setting up developmentally appropriate routines and transitions—and thus better support children for success.

In my first year with kindergartners, learning more about their common language and cognitive characteristics helped me to more effectively structure lessons and classroom routines. Realizing how important it is to use concrete and basic language with many kindergartners led me to plan more carefully the vocabulary I used in giving directions, leading transitions, and teaching lessons. For instance, I often taught games involving making or getting “pairs” of cards. After some initial confusion, I discovered that some students (many of whom were also English language learners) didn’t know what “a pair” was or thought I was asking them to somehow make fruit out of their cards!

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As I started to look at words through kindergarten eyes, I brought in more actual objects and photos of objects to illustrate new or different concepts. I learned to connect new material more concretely to what children already knew or had only recently learned.

Discovering kindergartners’ need for and love of repetition, I also tried to build in rhymes, repeat favorite activities, and use predictable structures in my lessons. For instance, I taught the children how to play concentration with a partner and then used that same game structure to review many concepts we had learned. Repetition helps build kindergartners’ competence and confidence, enabling them to gradually try out new and different ways of completing learning tasks and activities. By providing repetition throughout the school day and year—in songs, games, routines, and so on—I was addressing a critical developmental need of kindergartners.

I also learned to break down routines into smaller parts and teach each part separately. To teach behavior expectations for when we met as a whole group in the circle area, I first thought about how to define each child’s

space. Even though I inherited a rug with pre-marked spaces for where children should sit in the circle, I discovered that the class still benefited from my pointing out these spaces and how to know the boundaries for each.



Then I taught students how to check to make sure they were in their own space and how to respectfully let others know when they felt encroached upon. (To teach these and other skills, I use a teaching method called interactive modeling, which is described in detail in Chapter 2, “Schedules and Routines,” starting on page 43.) Because young children usually don’t know where to put their hands and legs when sitting in the circle, I modeled how to do this as well.

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Although with older students I often gave choices about how to sit, I found that kindergartners did better with one clear set of expectations and far fewer choices. Other “circle” behaviors that I broke down and taught included how to show attentive listening, how to signal a need to go to the bathroom, and how to signal a desire to contribute to a conversation. By understanding children’s common developmental characteristics, I was better able to tailor my teaching of these and other routines to help set kindergartners up for success in school.

## Common Characteristics of Kindergartners

The table on pages 6–7 summarizes some common characteristics of children in this grade. Knowing these characteristics can help you plan and tailor your teaching, set up the classroom, and work with parents, all to best meet kindergartners’ needs. As you use this table to help you in your teaching, keep these points in mind:

- **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 makeup—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 kindergartner might have moved past the literal and concrete phase in language development but still struggle with simple gross motor actions such as running and jumping.
- **The table gives you a practical frame of reference.** Sometimes when we see certain behaviors or behavior patterns in classrooms, we wonder: “What’s going on here?” “Is it me or something I’m doing that’s causing this?” “Is there something more I should know about this child or these children?” The table will give you a place to turn to if you’re wondering about a behavior, whether you should address it, and, if so, how. For example, as the table shows, many kindergartners seek frequent feedback from adults. As we help these children build self-confidence and a sense of competence so that they become less dependent on their teacher’s opinion, it’s helpful to know that needing frequent adult approval is a fairly common stage in kindergartners’ development.

In brief, this table is not intended to limit your thinking about kindergartners’ potential or to lead you to ignore the needs of children who differ from other kindergartners. For example, although many kindergartners like to please their teachers and follow the rules, not all will. Don’t assume that something is “wrong” with children who test limits more. Instead, figure out how to give them the boundaries and guidance they need. Think of the table not as an ending point, but as a starting point.

To learn more about child development, see the resources in the “About Child Development” section on pages 148–149.

# Kindergartners

## Common Characteristics

## School Implications

### *Social-Emotional*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Need a great deal of adult approval—like to know exactly what’s expected and that they’re meeting those expectations.</li><li>■ Enjoy helping and following the rules.</li><li>■ Like to ask for and receive permission.</li><li>■ Often have difficulty seeing things from another person’s point of view. Tend to think there’s only one “right way.”</li><li>■ Enjoy routines and structure.</li><li>■ Often cry when upset, embarrassed, angry, or confused.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Give frequent positive and specific reinforcement to all children, including when they accomplish tasks independently.</li><li>■ Check in with children frequently to make sure they understand directions.</li><li>■ Try to have predictable schedules and routines.</li><li>■ Use children’s literature, drama, role-play, and other strategies to help kindergartners develop a repertoire of social skills (for example, what to do when they’re upset, how to put themselves in someone else’s shoes, how to explore alternative ways of doing something, and how to monitor their own work).</li></ul> |
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### *Physical*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Focus best visually on objects or writing that is close to them.</li><li>■ Are better at gross motor tasks (such as running and jumping) than at earlier ages, but still can be awkward with small motor movements.</li><li>■ May find printing challenging—for instance, they may reverse certain letters or numbers.</li><li>■ Are very active and energetic.</li><li>■ Are prone to falling out of chairs, often sideways.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Avoid having children copy from the board or from a chart placed far away from them.</li><li>■ Provide frequent movement breaks and include movement in daily lessons and routines.</li><li>■ Give children regular opportunities for recess and physical play.</li><li>■ Provide scaffolding for fine motor tasks, especially printing. Place dots on the paper to show where to start writing or give children a craft stick (or remind them to use their finger) to help them space between words.</li></ul> |
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# Kindergartners

## Common Characteristics

## School Implications

### Cognitive

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Like to repeat experiences and copy previous products.</li><li>■ Often have difficulty seeing more than one way to do something.</li><li>■ Can pace themselves and work quietly for longer periods of time (eventually up to fifteen or twenty minutes), but will generally need teacher approval and support to change activities.</li><li>■ Like to learn through direct experience or hands-on learning.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Provide learning experiences that are mostly active and interactive, and include repetition.</li><li>■ Reinforce their efforts, but gently nudge them into trying new things and reassure them that mistakes are okay.</li><li>■ Provide a few models for how to do assignments beforehand and allow for frequent sharing of their work.</li><li>■ Check in with children briefly before expecting them to change activities.</li></ul> |
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### Language

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Are often very literal and basic in their understanding of language.</li><li>■ Express themselves briefly—sometimes in just a few words.</li><li>■ Often think out loud (for example, saying “I’m going to choose the black crayon” before taking the black crayon).</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Think through (and sometimes even write out for yourself) your directions and explanations in advance. Display class rules, key routines, and schedules, and choral-read them.</li><li>■ Break assignments and tasks into easily understood and manageable parts. Expect and allow quiet talking during work time.</li><li>■ Check in frequently and assess children’s understanding.</li><li>■ Avoid overreacting to impulsive statements. Instead, guide children to think before speaking (for example, teach them to wait a few seconds before responding).</li></ul> |
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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. 2002. [WWW.BSC-CDHS.ORG/FOSTERPARENTTRAINING/PDFS/CHILDEVELGUIDE.PDF](http://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, MD. Harper Paperbacks. 2000.

## What about Developmentally Younger and Older Kindergartners?

Schools and school systems have different cutoff dates for when children can begin kindergarten, so you may have students who are younger or older than what is typically considered kindergarten age. Even within a group of children who are approximately the same chronological age, some will likely have developmental traits more typical of older or younger children.



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Chronologically or developmentally younger kindergartners may demonstrate behaviors more often associated with preschoolers. Consider the following common characteristics of younger kindergartners and the accompanying ideas for how you can adapt your teaching accordingly:

■ **Often clumsy and able to sit still for only short periods of time.** Avoid jumping to the conclusion that these children have attentional issues. While some might, many others may just be going through a phase of development. Try to modify or scaffold physical

tasks for them—for example, have them serve the nonliquid portions of snack, or make pathways in the classroom more visible for them so that they do not step on other children as they move around. Explore ways to make their work periods shorter—for example, shorten their assignments or let them do a quick check-in to show you or a classmate their work halfway through a work period. Provide lots of physical activity breaks and a variety of hands-on explorations.

■ **Love talking and being with friends, but often engage in more parallel (rather than interactive) play and dialogue.** Build in frequent opportunities for these children to talk during instructional and independent work times. At independent work times, seat children who share this parallel play characteristic together and somewhat separate from peers who might prefer a little more quiet. Follow up with these children when they don't



respond to you or classmates: “Jeremy, Jena asked if you wanted to swing on the swings with her. Go ahead and tell her ‘yes’ or ‘no, thank you.’”

- **May respond physically when upset and need adult assistance to express emotions verbally.** Look for these children’s “triggers” and try to head off physical responses. Respond with firmness and respect when a student is becoming upset—for example: “Marissa, stop. Take a breath. Walk to me.” If a child hits or hurts another, give a clear and firm logical consequence. For example: Begin with a time-out and then consider moving the child to another spot to work (if the hitting occurred during a work time). Devote some class time to doing role-plays, reading stories, and reflecting on ways children can calm down and let people know in a respectful way when they’re angry or upset.

Some of your kindergartners may be chronologically or developmentally older—with traits more typical of first graders. Here are some of the common characteristics and ideas for how to adjust your teaching to support these children:

- **Highly social and energetic.** Provide lots of noncompetitive, cooperative activities that will give these children a chance to move and socialize in positive ways. As with younger kindergartners, limit the times when you require these children to be quiet. When possible, group them with other children who need to talk some as they work.

- **Often in a hurry and excited to learn, but not too concerned about creating a perfect product.** Reinforce their efforts and understand that they’ll grow into caring more about their finished products. For instance, if a child brings you a picture that is sketchily drawn, with few details, ask him or her to tell you about it. Often, children see more in their work than we can. Your



listening will show your respect and help you more accurately gauge their learning.

- **Talkative and enjoy explaining their thoughts.** Provide many opportunities for children to explain how something happened and how things work. Try to check in with them several times a day for a quick chat. Doing so will help reduce how often they need to seek you out.

## How to Use This Book

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

- **Read cover to cover.** This book is intended to walk you through setting up and running an effective kindergarten classroom. So if you know far enough in advance that kindergarten will be your assigned grade, read the whole book straight through.
- **Right now all I want to know is . . .** If, like me, you find out that you're teaching kindergarten with little advance notice, just read the sections that are the most pertinent or interesting to you at first. Maybe you want to make sure you get off to a good start with parents. Go right to Chapter 5, "Communicating with Parents," starting on page 111. Or maybe you want to make sure you break up routines into tiny steps and teach those thoroughly. If so, head right to Chapter 2, "Schedules and Routines," starting on page 37. Read what you need and then return to the other chapters when you have more time.

No matter which path you choose, be careful not to let yourself get overwhelmed while you read. Try a few strategies or ideas at a time when you're ready for them. Come back to the book for more information as you gain confidence in your kindergarten teaching abilities. Don't worry if you're not doing everything at first—no one is! Also, try not to worry too much about making mistakes as you teach. The struggle and beauty of teaching is that you can always improve. Your students will continue to learn as you make adjustments and fine-tunings, and they can greatly benefit from seeing a real-life model of an adult who is a lifelong learner.



## Last Word

On the last day of my second year teaching kindergarten, I shared the news that I was going to have a baby boy. The children's questions and advice told me a great deal about what they were taking away from kindergarten: "Are you going to teach him all the songs you taught us?" "Are you going to read him some good books like you read us?" "Are you going to let him win games?" "You're going to need to be firm with him sometimes!"

With kindergartners so excited about learning and so open, you can make a positive difference in their lives. You can help them feel excited about school and what it has to offer. You can foster social and academic skills and qualities, such as persistence, resiliency, assertion, and cooperation, that they'll need for school success. I hope this book helps you do these things (and more) in practical and inspiring ways. What you say and do as a kindergarten teacher truly matters!