

Knowing Fourth Graders



- F**ourth graders are so alive! For good or bad, fourth graders care deeply about almost everything that happens at school, and ambivalence is rare. When I taught this grade, I got used to students rushing down the hallways from the bus in the morning. They would unload their backpacks and coats in a frenzy (often dropping them unintentionally on the floor in their hurry), push through the door, and rush to the schedule posted on the wall. Even well into the year, they'd comment on the day with exclamations of delight and pangs of anguish. "Yes! We have PE today!" one student would exclaim while high-fiving a buddy. "Hey, no fair! You said we were going to get to work on our science projects today!" "We have an assembly later? What's it about? Do we have to go? What if it's boring? I can never see at those things!"

Whether expressed as joy or anxiety, emotional intensity is a hallmark of fourth graders. Exclamation marks seem to pepper their language. School goes best for them when teachers respond to their intensity with a consistent, relaxed, and light-hearted approach. Teaching fourth graders is about creating a safe and comfortable classroom climate so that students feel secure enough to relax and take academic risks.

My goal in writing this book is to provide you with the essentials of setting up and running a fourth grade classroom so that your teaching—and your students' learning—can be joyful and rigorous. You'll find information on everything from arranging classroom furniture to planning and teaching lunch and recess routines, from building community to engaging parents in classroom life. Whether you're new to teaching or an experienced teacher switching to fourth grade, you'll find helpful information and advice about teaching this grade with success.

Know Where Students Are Developmentally

As educators know from researchers and their own classroom observations, children's growth and development follow certain patterns. Just as children's height, weight, and physical abilities change, so do things such as their attention span, their sense of humor, their tendency to prefer large or small groups in social settings, and their sensitivities to change, risk taking, and friendship challenges. Knowing our students in these areas that so deeply impact their learning is fundamental to teaching them well. When we design classrooms, lessons, curricular projects, and routines according to our knowledge of students' strengths and needs, we create classrooms that allow students to be more successful, both socially and academically.

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I remember my first year teaching fourth grade. I knew that we were supposed to practice multiplication facts as part of our math work, so I set up a system of weekly Friday math quizzes. I started to pressure the students to study math facts as part of their nightly homework so they could do well on Friday. As the year went on, I noticed that some students seemed to be getting more and more anxious. Friday mornings were pure torture for the students who, try as they might, just couldn't memorize the toughest facts. (You know the ones: 7×6 , 7×8 , 6×8 , 4×8 , etc.) Not only that, but an alarming number of students started to exclaim, "Oh! I hate math! I'm so stupid!" That ultimately pushed me to drop the weekly quizzes and stop the math fact pressure.



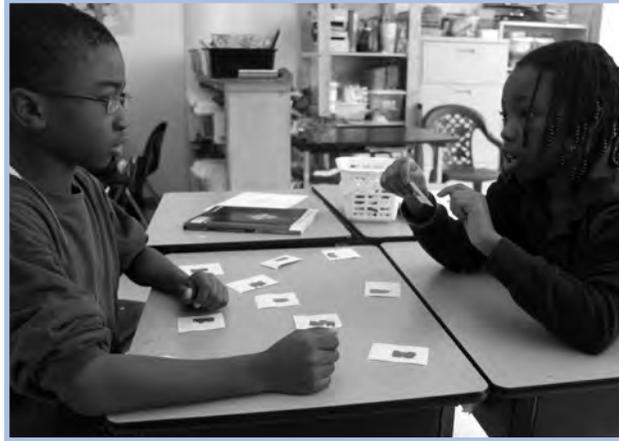
It wasn't until a couple of years later that I learned, from reading, talking to colleagues, and attending teacher workshops, to think about where students are developmentally when trying to understand their classroom behavior.

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I picked up practical strategies for adjusting my teaching to match their strengths and challenges. I had many "aha" moments as I gained some answers to why my earlier approach to teaching math facts didn't work for many



fourth graders. I learned that fourth graders tend to be self-critical and intense. Though they can enjoy competition, the pressure of intense testing and too-high expectations can defeat them. No wonder there were so many tears!



With this realization, I changed my approach. I had the class play games that helped them practice math facts. All students also kept personal multiplication charts in their math books so they could refer to them as they worked on longer multiplication and division problems. I gave an occasional fact quiz to “check and see how we’re doing as a class,” but the pressure was low. Not surprisingly, some students still mastered their facts easily, while others struggled. However, the stress level in the class was much lower. Best of all, I no longer heard students saying they were no good at math simply because they couldn’t remember a few math facts!

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Common Characteristics of Fourth Graders

As that last story about math facts illustrates, one of the most commonly recognized characteristics of fourth graders is their intensity and inclination to be self-critical. Fourth graders tend to be sensitive, industrious, curious, and serious about fairness and justice. It’s not uncommon to see a group of fourth graders on the playground spending more than half of their recess time arguing about who gets to pitch in kickball or whether someone was fouled in basketball.

The table on pages 5 and 6 details some of the common characteristics of fourth graders. As you use this table, 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—from the historical era in which a

person grows up, to the person's culture, family, and the institutions he or she encounters (like schools, churches, and the media). The table is not intended to ignore this complexity but instead to offer you a bridge between theory and the reality of classroom teaching.

- **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 fourth grader might display the reading and writing abilities typical of most fourth graders while being relaxed and easygoing when working through conflicts on the playground, a trait more common in fifth graders.
- **The table gives you a practical frame of reference.** It lets you prepare for fourth graders and have a resource if something puzzling comes up. For example, you may notice that many students are melting down during competitive games. This is pretty common in most of the fourth grade year, so you may want to adjust the games to deemphasize competition, knowing that students will probably be better able to handle competition at the end of the year or in fifth grade.
- **The table is not about what's "normal."** It's not intended to limit your thinking about students' potential, to help you make decisions about whether a student is "normal," or to lead you to ignore the needs of students who differ from other fourth graders. For example, although many fourth graders can be socially anxious, some thrive on getting up in front of others to perform skits or present research projects. In fact, most fourth graders can be successful with these sorts of tasks if we set them up for success through building a safe classroom community.

To learn more about child development, see the resources listed at the end of this book.

Fourth Graders

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Social-Emotional

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Individualistic and competitive■ Often worried or anxious■ Complain about fairness and hurt feelings■ Critical of self and others■ Often prefer same-gender friends■ Need lots of encouragement | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Assign partner work when possible; this minimizes the long debates and arguments that large-group projects may trigger■ Watch carefully for over-competitiveness and criticism of peers■ Use gentle joking and laughter to help keep things light and playful; avoid sarcasm, which wounds fourth graders deeply■ Lead cooperative and team-building games to build a sense of community and safety■ Keep assessment low-key, concrete, and focused on strengths, not deficits |
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Physical

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Push themselves to physical limits■ Complain about aches, pains, and injuries■ May twist hair or bite nails to relieve tension■ Better coordinated but still working on physical control■ Can't sit still for long■ Still need recess and snack | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Keep students moving to reduce wiggles and help with focus and attention■ Allow students to choose their best working position (sitting, standing, etc.) when possible■ Keep direct-teaching lessons short■ If possible, have two shorter recess breaks, rather than one long one■ Include snack in the daily schedule |
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Fourth Graders CONTINUED

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Cognitive

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|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Industrious and curious■ Beginning to see “bigger world,” including social issues■ Still very concrete in their thinking■ Can draw information from printed material (they’ve moved from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”)■ Easily overwhelmed | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Elicit passionate engagement by embedding discussion of right and wrong, justice and fairness into science and social studies■ Break large projects into bite-sized chunks■ Offer hands-on, experiential learning activities |
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Language

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Love word play, new vocabulary, and descriptive language■ Sometimes revert to baby talk■ Enjoy exaggeration and “dirty” jokes■ Very verbal—if they think it, they say it! | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Use jokes, limericks, silly poetry, and word games for transition activities (standing in line, waiting for assembly, etc.)■ Tap into students’ playfulness and sense of humor throughout the day■ Do short skits drawn from their books and stories so they can play with voices■ Expect lots of “verbal observations” (<i>Ew! Cool! I hate that! Awesome!</i>) during lessons, read-alouds, and projects■ Avoid hypothetical questions—fourth graders frequently answer them aloud! |
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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-DHS.ORG/FOSTERPARENTTRAINING/PDFS/CHILDDEVELGUIDE.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.

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What about Developmentally Younger and Older Fourth Graders?

In any one classroom, you'll find a range of ages. Some years, your class may feel (or actually be) young or old for fourth grade. A group of developmentally or chronologically younger fourth graders are likely to display characteristics common among third graders. Here's just a sampling of those common characteristics, along with suggestions for how you might adjust your teaching accordingly.

Younger fourth graders may:

- **Enjoy socializing and working in groups.** Structure large group projects such as plays or team science projects, and expect that students will socialize as they work.
- **Have still-improving hand-eye coordination.** Allow extra time for practicing handwriting, drawing, and crafts.
- **Have rapidly expanding vocabularies and love to explain their ideas.** Provide lots of opportunities for students to explain their thinking through structures like partner chats and small group discussions.
- **Tend to work/play hard and tire quickly.** Keep periods short. A couple of quick recess breaks are better than one long one. Keep lessons succinct and vary the activity levels of the day. (Follow up a quiet time like writing with a more active one like hands-on science.)

If you have developmentally or chronologically older fourth graders, they're likely to show some common fifth grade characteristics. Following are a few examples and implications for your teaching.





Older fourth graders may:

- **Generally be content, working well in groups and enjoying peers and teacher.** Leverage their social strengths by structuring plenty of group work, book buddies, peer conferences, and whole-class projects.
- **Be experiencing rapid physical growth.** Keep furniture and seating in the classroom spaced apart to help avoid accidental bumps and spills. Offer as much outdoor time and physical challenge as possible, balanced with quiet rest periods.

- **Be good at memorizing facts, classifying, and organizing.** Now you can expect them to master those math facts. Assign more complex science and social studies projects. Incorporate statistics, facts, important dates, and famous people into lessons.

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- **Have strong listening and talking skills.** Make use of students' increasing abilities to verbalize their thinking by structuring plenty of class discussions, debates, reading and writing conferences, and math groups.

How to Use This Book

You can use this book in a couple of ways. For example:

- **Read it cover to cover.** If you're reading this book the summer before you teach fourth grade, you may have the time to read it from beginning to end. This will give you the "big picture" of how to set up and run an effective fourth 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.
- **Right now all I need to know is ...** It may be the day before school starts, and you were just hired or transferred. You don't have much time, and you need to arrange the furniture in your classroom. Or, you may be in the middle of the school year and have a particular challenge (perhaps about communicating with parents about homework or about 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 surf around a little more when you have the luxury of more time!

Regardless of how you use this book, consider implementing new ideas slowly. Just as we shouldn't overwhelm a student with several big changes to make all at once in one writing conference, we need to be gentle on ourselves. 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.

Ready? Get Set ...

Fourth grade is fantastic. I truly love the spirit and energy of fourth graders. They're in this magical time when they aren't really "little kids" anymore, but they haven't hit adolescence either. Primed for learning and craving positive adult attention, fourth graders will quickly become immersed in their learning and passionate about their work when given a safe and comfortable classroom atmosphere.

- I'll never forget Shawn, a student of mine who illustrates fourth graders' potential to connect with school. Shawn was an athletic and active boy who had never really loved school before fourth grade. At one parent conference, his mother, a strong and forceful woman, sat down with me and immediately demanded, "What's happened to Shawn?" Taken aback, I asked what she meant. Her tone softened as she gave me a wink. "We were at his brother's baseball game last night, and he asked to stay in the car because he wanted to

write some more poetry. I've never seen anything like that!"

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.

How could you *not* love teaching fourth grade?

Go!

