

Knowing Fifth Graders



I had taught fourth grade for four years and decided that I could keep on teaching it for the rest of my career. I had no interest in changing grades. Then, in the spring, our principal announced that the budget had been approved and included another fifth grade teacher for next year to bring class sizes down a bit. She wanted to know if any teacher in the school wanted to take the new fifth grade spot.

The current group of fourth graders I taught was a tough one—the most challenging class I’d had in my short career. But they had just gelled as a class and were turning into an incredibly strong learning community. I went to the principal and asked if I could move up with this group of fourth graders. She agreed, and I was thrilled. My journey as a fifth grade teacher had begun.

That class still stands out in my mind. They had great energy and unique personalities. They were funny and goofy and earnest and a handful all at the same time. I learned so many new things as a teacher as I moved with this class from fourth to fifth grade.

Know Where Students Are Developmentally

First of all, I learned that fifth graders aren’t just slightly bigger fourth graders. Besides showing physical changes, these children also tend to be different from their fourth grade selves in the social-emotional, cognitive, and language realms. That this is so shouldn’t come as a surprise for teachers. Research tells us, and the experiences of seasoned teachers confirm, that children grow and develop on multiple fronts at once. Just as children’s physical characteristics (height, weight, physical coordination, eyesight, and so on) change, so, too,

do other characteristics, such as attention span, friendship preferences, ability to think abstractly, and sense of humor. When we understand the common characteristics of fifth graders, we can create classroom spaces, design lessons, and group children in ways that are especially appropriate for them.

Common Characteristics of Fifth Graders

I sometimes joke that as an extrovert, I often need to talk to think. Many fifth graders seem to share that need. Whether working on math problems, walking in the hallways, conducting a science experiment, riding on the school bus, or waiting for an assembly to begin, fifth graders generally love to chat. Of course, we could say this of just about any age (and for adults as well as children), but in fifth grade, this characteristic seems especially prominent.

This need to talk constantly can be a real challenge if one of our goals is to have a quiet classroom and school environment. And while the importance of a quiet school environment is often overemphasized, I think that most educators would agree that a generally calm and quiet classroom helps children to concentrate and feel safe. So what might school look like if we leveraged the super-chattiness of fifth graders in ways that could help with their learning?

- Here's what I do: I group students together at desks and tables in small collaborative clusters, spaced apart from one another. I use interactive modeling (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) to teach fifth graders how to use quiet voices while talking in the hallways and then let them walk in pairs instead of in single file. And I incorporate partner-chats, peer conferences, and other

collaborative structures into daily lessons in all subjects. Rather than spend time and energy trying to keep fifth graders quiet, I teach them how and when to talk productively. If you think of fifth graders' common charac-

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The inclination to talk is just one characteristic that many fifth graders share. In general, they also can take on more complex work in school, are becoming more focused on peer relationships, and can think more abstractly.



The table on pages 4–6 highlights some of the most common characteristics of fifth graders. As you explore this table, it’s important to keep these ideas 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. Instead, it offers 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. And for many children, one area may develop at a much faster rate than another. For example, a particular fifth grader might have social-emotional behaviors that are very common among fourth graders (such as preferring to play or work with one or two friends and being less concerned with “popular” trends or social status). But that child may also have cognitive behaviors more like those of a sixth grader (such as more advanced math or reading skills). Finally, it’s important to keep in mind that the traits listed in the table should never limit your thinking about a student’s potential. There will always be individuals with capabilities beyond those considered typical; not every child will fit neatly into the categories outlined here.

- **The table gives you a practical frame of reference.** It lets you prepare for teaching fifth graders and gives you a resource if something puzzling comes up. For instance, once you start teaching fifth grade, you may notice that some students keep complaining about being hungry in the middle of the morning, even though they ate breakfast and have the earliest lunch. Once you know that many fifth graders are experiencing growth spurts and struggling to maintain their energy levels, you might adjust to this developmental need by introducing a snack option that allows them to eat while they work (within certain guidelines you set). Instead of getting frustrated with this or any other behavior, use your knowledge of fifth graders' common characteristics to develop practical solutions that support their healthy growth and development.

To learn more about child development, see the resources in the "About Child Development" section on page 121.

Fifth Graders

Common Characteristics	School Implications
<i>Social-Emotional</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Generally happy; enjoy family, peers, and teachers. ■ Work well in groups. ■ Usually truthful; developing a more mature sense of right and wrong. ■ Sensitive to and able to resolve issues of fairness. ■ Able to enjoy cooperative and competitive games. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build group work into lessons, activities, and projects. (Flexible groups can work well; students can work with lots of different people, including adults and peers.) ■ Expect arguments (and that they will tend to end quickly). ■ Encourage their developing sense of fairness and of right and wrong. (These can lead to lively class debates and discussions.) ■ Provide opportunities for peer tutoring, book buddies, and development of conflict resolution and other interpersonal skills.

Fifth Graders

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Physical

- Large muscles developing quickly.
- Drawn to the outdoors and physical challenges.
- Handwriting may become messier than in fourth grade.
- Due to growth spurts, frequently hungry and can tire easily.

- Set up schedules to include sufficient time for recess (and other outdoor play), energizers and other movement breaks, snacks, and lunch.
- Consider a snack option that enables students to eat and work in the classroom.
- Provide instruction and practice for use of tools such as rulers, compasses, and computers.

Cognitive

- Good at memorizing facts.
- Increasingly able to think abstractly; good at solving problems.
- Enjoy rules and logic.
- Enjoy collecting, classifying, and organizing.
- Take pride in schoolwork.
- Able to concentrate for longer periods of time.

- Structure complex projects with proper scaffolding and guidance to build on their abilities to be highly productive with schoolwork.
- Give ongoing encouragement and reinforcement for both effort and results.
- Include lessons that help build their memory skills (for example, practicing math facts and learning facts about geography, history, and world records).
- Support classification and other organizational skills with hands-on science work and math projects.

Fifth Graders CONTINUED

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Language

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Expressive and talkative.■ Like to explain things.■ Able to listen well.■ Interest in reading independently becomes stronger. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Encourage students to verbalize their thinking to help make discussions, debates, book groups, writing conferences, math groups, and so on more productive.■ Provide opportunities for choral reading, singing, reciting poetry, and performing skits and plays. |
|--|---|
- Include time for independent reading and writing.

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. 2002.

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, MD. Harper Paperbacks. 2000.

What about Developmentally Younger and Older Fifth Graders?

Of course, in any classroom, you'll have students of various ages and at various points along the developmental path. The tallest student in the class may seem younger socially. A student who is younger chronologically may be a stronger reader. Some fifth graders may display characteristics more often displayed by students in fourth grade or sixth grade. Or they may display characteristics of multiple grades, depending on their growth and development in a particular area. You may even have enough students at a similar point in their development to make the class as a whole feel "younger" or "older."

Certainly, you'll see a shift as the year progresses. Springtime fifth graders will be a different bunch than they were at the start of school. Again, all children are different and each class is different. Still, there can be some characteristics that you would expect to see in fifth graders who are developmentally younger (more like fourth graders) or those who are developmentally older (more like sixth graders).



7

Younger fifth graders may:

- **Prefer smaller work and play groups.** When younger fifth graders can work in partnerships, rather than groups of four or five, they may have more positive social interactions and do more productive academic work.
- **Be a bit more tense and anxious.** It's helpful for younger fifth grade students if you're extra careful to explain directions step by step, stick to your schedule, and break larger projects into bite-sized tasks.
- **Have a shorter attention span.** Younger fifth graders will benefit from shorter lessons and work periods and from frequent movement breaks. They may also tire more quickly, so several short breaks throughout the day are better than one long one in the middle of the day.



- **Still be very concrete learners.** Younger fifth graders may not understand subtle humor. They will likely need to use math manipulatives or pictures to work through more abstract concepts (such as long division or different historical perspectives).

Older fifth graders may:

- **Push back on adult authority.** Older fifth graders may be more combative and argumentative. They need adults to remain empathetic and keep their sense of humor.

- **Be growing.** A lot. Students in the throes of growth spurts need frequent rests, snack breaks, and physical activity. Having healthy snacks on hand and scheduling short breaks can help them better focus on academic tasks.

8

- **Be concerned with social dynamics.** This is the age for some students, especially girls, when who's in and who's out, who "likes" whom, and who is friends with whom becomes much more important.
- **Begin to take broader perspectives.** As their thinking becomes increasingly complex, older fifth grade students are better able to see issues from multiple sides. They enjoy debates and arguing for their cause.

How to Use This Book

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

- **Read it cover to cover.** If you have time, and the start of the school year is still weeks away, you may want to read this whole book from start to finish. This approach can help you develop a "big picture" view of fifth grade while picking up many practical tips.
- **Focus on something specific.** Perhaps you've been recently hired or transferred and will be teaching fifth grade in just a few days. If so, you might want to begin reading about how to set up the classroom and arrange the

furniture (Chapter 1). On the other hand, you might be several weeks or months into the school year. In that case, you might start with the chapter that seems most relevant to your situation right now. For example, if the classroom community is struggling to come together, turn to Chapter 3. Or if you feel that students are ready for a big project or field trip, start with Chapter 4. Wherever you begin, you can always check out the other parts 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 overwhelm you and the students. Try one or two new things at a time and get comfortable with them before moving on. 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 . . .

Fifth grade is a year of such incredible growth and change! At the beginning of each school year, I'm always surprised at how small and young incoming fifth graders seem. And by the end of the year, I'm thrilled that so many fifth graders have grown and reached amazing new developmental milestones. It's incredible to observe these changes—noticing, for example, how some students struggle to see others' points of view in September and then seeing them carefully consider everyone's opinions during project work a few months later. Actively supporting this growth and development is one of the great joys of teaching fifth grade.

As the year moves along, you'll undoubtedly find yourself getting caught up in the many demands of the teaching profession. After all, there are standards to cover, phone calls to make, paperwork to fill out, and other tasks to complete. So, as you embark on the journey of teaching fifth graders, don't forget to really get to know and enjoy the students and their families. They're what make all the hard work so worthwhile!

. . . Go!