

Knowing Second Graders



I am always struck by the way second graders strive to make sense of the bigger world and to make their personal worlds as orderly and safe as possible. Among other things, they put a great deal of faith in facts. When I meet them before school starts, they are often nervous and get through our opening conversation by listing facts to define themselves. (*"I have two regular brothers and two*

stepbrothers. They are my stepbrothers because my parents are divorced, and my dad's new wife has children.") They also have an amazing capacity to remember details and often seem slightly discomfited when their teachers forget facts they consider essential to stories being read aloud. (*"Don't you remember, Ms. Wilson? In chapter one, Malcolm put an origami star up his nose and had to go the nurse?"*) And they like to read series books (it's safer to stick with what they know!)—in order. I will never forget the horror of many of my students when upon discovering that our class library lacked the next book in a particular series, I suggested that they just go ahead to the next one. Not possible for many second graders!

These and many other unique characteristics of second graders make it a fun and satisfying year to teach. Second graders' devotion to facts and order helps them retain much of what they learn, put algorithms and other learning structures to use, and work hard to follow instructions. They value their end products and often do careful, thoughtful work.

However, second graders' love of order, facts, and safety also can lead them to be perfectionists and to be quite risk averse. They need help from their teachers so that they can learn to balance their desire for order and perfection with an appreciation for surprises and mistakes. Second graders benefit from seeing their teachers make mistakes and laugh them off. They need

us to understand and empathize with their craving for order while gently pushing them to also see the joy in random events, surprises, and changes.

I wrote this book to help you bring such understanding and gentle nudging into your classroom so that you and your second graders can get the most out of this valuable year. You'll find information on a variety of topics, including arranging furniture, planning and teaching lunch and recess routines, building community, and engaging parents in classroom life. All my recommendations consider common strengths and challenges of second graders. Whether you're new to teaching or are switching into second grade, the ideas and tips in this book will help support you and your students.

Children Are Different at Different Grades

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Research tells us, and we educators know from our own observations, that all children develop and change in certain ways as they grow up. Over time, their physical and verbal abilities change. They also experience other changes, such as their preference for working and playing alone or with a group, how open or averse they are to taking risks, or what they think is funny. We must know such common characteristics to teach our students well. With this knowledge, we can design work that is appropriately challenging and engaging for them; anticipate what they will need in the way of furniture, supplies, and room setup; and know how to respond when things go wrong.

- I was dramatically reminded of the importance of paying attention to where children are developmentally when I became a second grade teacher after teaching first grade for four years. The first graders I taught had happily drawn self-portraits whenever assigned. I thought the same assignment would be a safe, engaging activity for the beginning of second grade as well, one that would tell me a great deal about these students' talents, personalities, and

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interests. I was dismayed when, instead, the task brought on anxiety, many requests for mirrors so that the children could study themselves, and



virtual incapacitation. What made this task, so enjoyable the year before, so arduous now?

Suspecting that the answer had something to do with the differences between most first and second graders, I did some reading on the subject. My readings confirmed what I had been observing. First graders typically love trying new things, work at a fast pace, and are not too concerned with the quality of their end products. For them, producing a self-portrait was no big deal. On the other hand, I learned that just a year later most children need to be accurate, dislike taking risks, and hate making mistakes. To draw themselves, these second graders would require more support than I had provided. No wonder the self-portrait assignment was such a struggle for so many of them!

This experience taught me to scaffold so that second graders could be more successful with open-ended assignments like drawing self-portraits. I also learned to incorporate knowledge of second grade characteristics into my teaching in many other ways. The next section describes many of these characteristics so that you might begin to do the same.

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Common Characteristics of Second Graders

Of course, to teach second graders well, you will need to know about the many unique qualities typically seen in second graders in addition to their love of order and structure, avoidance of risk, and perfectionist tendencies. The table on pages 5 and 6 details these other common characteristics. 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 second 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 third grader (such as increased interest in logic).



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■ **The table gives you a practical frame of reference.** It lets you prepare for teaching second graders and have a resource if something puzzling comes up. For instance, once you start teaching second grade, you may notice that many students' writing is very tiny. 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 typical this behavior is will allow you to focus your energy on other aspects of your students' writing besides its size.

■ **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 second graders. For instance, although many second graders need fairly quick and manageable assignments, you may encounter students who appear ready to take on bigger, more ambitious projects. 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 112.

Second Graders

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Social-Emotional

- Are self-focused, with distinct likes and dislikes.
- Can be serious, moody, or shy.
- Dislike taking risks and making mistakes.
- Need security and structure.
- Like working and playing alone or with one friend; often find group work overwhelming.
- May change friendships quickly.

- Show appreciation and understanding of students. Private conversations and notes mean a great deal.
- Use playfulness and humor to lighten their tension.
- Stick to predictable schedules and routines. Provide coaching if these must change (assembly, special event, guest teacher, etc.)
- Give mostly individual or one-partner assignments.
- Provide private, quiet spaces (reading corners, desks with privacy dividers).
- Assign seats, but rotate them frequently to encourage working with a variety of classmates.

Physical

- Are more coordinated physically (better at sports, for example); get confidence boost from newfound success in physical activities.
- Can focus on small, close-up things; have difficulty seeing things far away, such as the board.
- Often write and draw compact, small letters and figures; find it difficult to write big.
- Have many aches, pains, and injuries (real and imagined).

- Provide plenty of opportunities for outdoor games.
- Minimize tasks involving copying from the board.
- Accept small handwriting (expecting big writing may be counterproductive). May be best to wait until they're older to teach cursive.
- Show understanding and reassurance about aches and pains.

Second Graders CONTINUED

Common Characteristics

School Implications

Cognitive

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Try hard to make their work perfect. ■ Enjoy repeating tasks and reviewing learning. ■ Enjoy inquiry and hands-on tasks; often wilt under time pressure. ■ Need frequent check-ins with the teacher. ■ Like to classify and sort. ■ Enjoy board and computer games. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Expect high-quality finished products. ■ Give open-ended assignments (write about a topic in their own words, investigate a phenomenon in science, etc.), but spell out clear steps to follow. ■ Eliminate or greatly limit timed assignments. ■ Give a heads-up that a work period is about to end. ■ Let students see classmates' works in progress (to realize the importance of process as well as end product). ■ Teach students ways to check in with you while you're working with others. ■ Provide a range of board games, puzzles, manipulatives, blocks, and craft materials. |
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Language

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Show significant growth in listening skills. ■ Speak with precision. ■ Enjoy one-on-one conversations, especially with adults. ■ Show great interest in words and have rapidly developing vocabularies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Make use of students' growing listening skills—gradually lengthen instruction and discussion periods (5–10 minutes at start of the year, 15–20 minutes by end of the year). ■ Provide listening centers and audiobooks. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Weave word play, word games, and vocabulary activities into many parts of the day. |
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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/CHILDEVELGUIDE.PDF

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.

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

What about Developmentally Younger and Older Second Graders?

In any one classroom, you'll find a range of chronological and developmental ages—children with earlier and later birthdays or children who do not show the common second grade characteristics regardless of where their birthdays fall. If you have developmentally or chronologically younger students, they may be more like first graders. Here's just a sampling of those younger characteristics, along with how you might adjust your teaching for these children.

- **Highly social, energetic, and competitive.** Provide lots of noncompetitive, cooperative activities. Require them to be quiet only when it's absolutely necessary, and then only for a short while.

- **Physically very active yet quick to tire.** Give lots of movement breaks, and keep assignments short. Give students space to spread out their work if possible.

- **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.

- **Talkative and enjoy explaining their thoughts.** Provide many opportunities for them to explain how something happened and how things work.

Some students in your class might show common third grade characteristics. Here are some examples and implications for your teaching.

- **Enjoy socializing and working in groups.** Structure large-group projects, but expect a mix of socializing and work.





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- **Have improving hand-eye coordination.** Allow time for practicing hand-writing, drawing, and crafts.
- **Are increasingly interested in logic, classification, and how things work.** Provide hands-on math and science lessons that involve the use of concrete tools to explore abstract concepts.
- **Have rapidly expanding vocabularies and love to explain their ideas.** Provide many opportunities to write stories and poems and record in writing what they've learned in social studies and science.

How to Use This Book

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

- **Read cover to cover.** If you have plenty of time and know you will be teaching second grade in the coming year, there are advantages to reading the book from beginning to end. Doing so will give you the big picture of how the common characteristics of second graders can inform the decisions you make before school starts and as the year progresses. You may

want to take notes or mark key passages so that you can return to them if you forget some strategies you wanted to try or just need another look at a behavior or situation.

- **Right now all I want to know is . . .** Of course, sometimes you don't know what grade you're teaching until right before the school year starts. In that case, you might just want to go for the information you need right away. Maybe you want some good ideas for how to connect with your students and their families right at the beginning of the year. In that case, go to Chapter 5, "Communicating with Parents." Or you might want to work on setting up the classroom in a way that accommodates second graders' needs. Read what you need, and then return to the other chapters later when you have more time.

Regardless of how you use this book, my goal is to help you, not overwhelm you. Start with ideas or practices that seem easy or make the most sense to you. You don't have to try everything at once. As you get comfortable with some basic strategies, bring in a few more. Remember that mistakes are how we learn, and children will survive if we do mess up (for instance, by giving them a self-portrait assignment that brings them to tears!). Often, mistakes are what make us better teachers.

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Last Word

Sometimes, we teachers focus on all the things that stand in our way or that we cannot do. But teaching second grade offers us so much that we *can* do. It's an exhilarating grade to teach. Among other things, you will be able to help your second graders make sense of the world, have the structure and order they crave, and most important, have fun while learning. Get to know your students—developmentally and individually—and enjoy them. Finally, be kind to yourself and forgive your mistakes. Not only will doing so help you, but it will also provide a powerful model for your students.