

Primary Grades

The Basics-- Building a Framework, Building Habits

Primary grades are grades one to three. By this time, a learning foundation has been laid-- most children have learned many things about the world immediately around them and are starting to get to know the larger world through books and audio/visual materials.

Many children reach first grade knowing letters and being able to sound out some words. Some may already be reading. Children aged six to seven know how to count and can easily do simple adding and subtracting. They are ready to learn more about math, and more about phonics and reading. They are able to take on greater responsibilities in household chores, and also in their own schoolwork.

Here are some teaching suggestions for the primary grades, starting with first grade:

First Grade

Even if by first grade your child is reading by him/herself, he/she will learn much more by having **you read aloud** to him/her. Vocabulary and greater depth in a topic can be gained through books that are not at a beginning reading level.

But **reading** is definitely an important task during first grade-- and having a child read aloud to you regularly is very important to his/her progress in reading. After he/she learns to read short vowel words and a few common sight words, long vowels can be added, and also vowel combinations such as "oi." This is the usual progression in phonetic reading programs.

You can have your first grader start some **spelling** practice, too-- mostly for words that follow a regular phonetic pattern, such as "word families" like "at, sat, bat . . ." and "big, wig, pig," and "gate, rate, plate."

After he/she becomes familiar with writing words, you can include **dictation** of one or two short sentences-- you say the sentence and the child writes it.

Another very important task at this age is to become more proficient at **handwriting**. Having your first grader **copy sentences** (based on certain topics, or based on phonics patterns) is a good way to do this. He/she can also copy topical lists of words, such as shapes or colors or number words, days of the week, etc. **Copying word lists** daily gives more penmanship practice than just writing one or two sentences.

You can help your first grader to explore writing composition by having him/her **tell you info or stories that you write down for him**. Expecting a six-year-old to write down all the words

for his thoughts is not realistic. Children who are beginning to read and write don't have the spelling and handwriting proficiency to record what they want to say. They are just starting to learn these skills. If no one writes for them they will usually only write a few words, and will either have a lot of misspellings or will have a self-restricted choice of words because of not knowing how to spell all the words they might use in speaking. Parents have to remember that just forming the letters can be hard work for a first grader. That's why doing short but frequent copywork assignments is so important!

For first grade, math includes familiarity of **numbers up to 100**, and counting by tens, as well as addition, subtraction, and starting to do **double-digit** adding and subtracting (without needing to borrow or carry numbers).

Some people like to introduce all four operations in first grade (adding, subtracting, multiplication, and division), and will have a child start working some very simple multiplication and division problems later in the year.

First graders also need to become familiar with **coins** and how to **tell time** using clocks with hands.

For subjects like science and history and geography, **listening to you read aloud** from children's books is a very effective teaching method. If you'd like to, you can also do some **hands-on projects** like planting seeds or doing some simple science experiments, or doing arts or crafts that go with a history/geography topic. Also, a child can be asked to **tell you** about what you've just read aloud-- whether or not there are review questions provided. This will help him/her to further process the information.

Children in primary grades like **music** and **singing**-- and songs can be included as a part of your first grade activities. You can sing songs just for fun, and can also use songs designed to help learn certain topics.

You can mix singing in with your study time, or do some songs as a separate activity. Having a variety of recorded music on in the background while children are doing free play is another good way to include both music and singing.

Second Grade

Second grade is basically a continuation of everything that has been done in first grade. Children continue learning **phonics** sounds and practice **reading** by reading aloud. They will need a parent to write for them if what they have to say is more than a few sentences, and they continue practicing handwriting by doing **copywork**. They continue adding and subtracting, extending this to **three digits** by the end of the year. They may start to do borrowing and

carrying (making exchanges of ten "ones" with one "ten"), and may learn some more multiplication facts and division facts. They become more familiar with coins, and using dollars and cents.

Here are some teaching suggestions for second grade:

It is usually easier for a second grader to **begin learning cursive** than to wait until third or fourth grade; while in second grade, the child is still in a "beginning to learn" mode, and yet has already gained enough proficiency with printing that starting cursive will not mean learning two different scripts at once.

You can introduce cursive by teaching your child how to write his/her name in cursive. Go slowly, letting him/her practice one letter or only a few letters at a time, if needed. You can use systematic work pages to help him learn the entire cursive alphabet, but be sure to also have him practice some words separately from doing the work pages.

A fun and effective way to do this is to use a "**Magnadoodle**" or an "Aquadoodle." (Magnadoodle is better as it can be immediately erased), or to use a **white board** with some colorful dry-erase pens. Children seem to like practicing cursive in these novel ways, and will look forward to writing a few words every day, at a separate time from doing their paper work pages. You can choose words that have letters they have been just learning in their work pages, and words with review letters. That way, with two different times to write in cursive, they will have better retention and more rapid progress.

Cursive work doesn't need to start right at the beginning of the second grade school year-- it can be started any time during the year, when you know your child is fairly confident with printing.

Continuing with **parent read-alouds** for science, history, and geography works well for second grade, and your child will be able to do some art/craft projects that require finer motor skills-- cutting more precisely, controlling a paintbrush more exactly, etc.

Second graders like to sing, and to listen to **music**, and may be interested in starting to learn to play melodies on a xylophone or keyboard.

Third Grade

By third grade, a child has often reached a level of reading proficiency that allows him to **read to learn**, and not *only* read to practice reading. This opens up some new opportunities for his/her studies. Some children struggle with reading; they may not be ready to study subjects by reading, but for many children who are ready, you can pick out **books for the child to read to you** that cover science or history or geography topics.

I think that in third grade, this works especially well for science-- there are many science books written for children that have colorful pictures and are very interesting. One series is the "Let's Read and Find Out About" books published by HarperCollins. Others can be found as a part of an intermediate reader series such as "Hello Reader" by Scholastic and "I Can Read" by HarperCollins and "Step Into Reading" by Random House. The type is larger in these children's science books, and the profusion of pictures adds to the learning.

Rather than using one science textbook, you can plan a series of these **children's science books** to have the child read aloud to you-- they are available at great discounts through used book sellers, and many titles are in libraries.

In third grade, children are doing addition and subtraction that requires **borrowing and carrying**, and are including numbers with **four digits**. They are also learning the **multiplication tables**, and are being introduced to **division facts**.

Memorizing the multiplication facts is a big focus of third grade math, and you can supplement your work pages or math book by having your child practice skip-counting. **Skip-counting** means that you count "by" a number-- for example, you count by fours: "four, eight, twelve, sixteen . . ." Counting by a number means you will be saying all the numbers that are a multiplication fact "answer" in the times table for that number. For the fours, two times four is eight, three times four is twelve, etc. So when you say, "four, eight, twelve . . ." it brings greater familiarity with the multiplication facts.

To practice skip-counting most effectively, have your child do it at a different time than when he is writing his math lessons out. You could have him/her roll a die and skip-count for the number on the die. Or you could follow a progression, practicing 2's for a while, then 3's, and continuing on. There are also skip-counting musical recordings available, that could be playing in the background while you and your child are stirring up batter for muffins or doing some other non-academic project.

Doing a little extra practice with skip-counting is well worth the effort-- your child will readily learn and remember the multiplication facts . . . and knowing math facts instantly is what makes all the math in the higher grades much easier.

Please do not assume that because a child has begun learning **cursive letters** in second grade and can write the cursive alphabet that he "knows" cursive and should be able to write cursive for any amount of copywork. Also, don't assume he no longer needs to **practice printing**. It actually takes several years to learn to write well in cursive. And being attentive to neatness and legibility when printing may be even more important for older students because they may tend to become lax since they already know how to print. Also, they may be writing hurriedly, just wanting to get the assignment done.

Here are some ways you can make sure your child's handwriting becomes or remains neat and easy to read:

For **printing**-- Insist that anything that is printed be written with adequate neatness. Allow some leeway-- but if your child's printing looks extremely sloppy, you can ask him/her to do it over. Sometimes it is best to wait until the next day to have the work redone-- especially if your child is having an attitude problem. (If your child doesn't want to do his work, or is upset for some reason, the handwriting he does may be extra scrawling and sloppy.) At times when the child needs to make only a minor correction, or rewrite only one or two sentences, and is not having an attitude problem, it would be a good idea to make the changes at the time they are discovered. For some writing projects, having a sloppy draft would be OK as long as the final copy is done neatly.

For **cursive**-- same as for printing, but keep in mind that writing more than about two sentences at a time in cursive may seem a daunting task to a third grader, so don't assign long passages. You may find that your child is more willing to write **cursive words in list form** (instead of in sentences) for daily cursive practice.

By third grade, your child may be ready to write **compositions** himself/herself, or may not be. If taking this on seems to be too much, you can continue writing from your child's dictation but ask that he/she copy your writing afterwards-- dividing up the copywork into several "chunks" to be done over several days if it is a large composition.

He/she can also start doing some **research**-- using various resources available to him-- to find some facts about a certain animal/plant/place/person/event, etc. and write them down. Give him/her a goal for what or how much to find out. Later, the child can read these findings aloud to the family at a mealtime, or you can help him/her to organize them into a short written report.

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