

The Leap into 4th Grade

Amazing energy and enthusiasm, increased anxiety, and tougher academic demands—all these make 4th grade a pivotal year.

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Yes!" cries Danny, pumping his fist as he looks at the schedule for the day. "We have P.E. today! I love P.E.!"

"Oh, come on!" groans Lisa as she reads the morning message posted by the teacher. "You're going to be out at a meeting today? What if we get a mean sub?"

For better or worse, 4th graders tend to have incredible energy and emotion. Their increasing awareness of others and the world around them can be both exciting and unnerving. Hair twisting, stomachaches, and headaches are common manifestations of the tension and anxiety that are common at this age. Most 4th graders also tend to have bursts of enthusiasm, followed by the need for rest and relaxation. Industrious and curious, they are often ready and eager for

new knowledge. Yet they are still concrete thinkers and need to learn by doing: creating posters, putting on plays, writing stories, reading books, playing games, and using math manipulatives to support abstract math concepts.

In school, 4th graders typically face new challenges and expectations. For example, 4th graders are expected to have made the shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." They usually face an increased homework load and more traditional instructional practices, such as end-of-unit tests and letter grades.

To help students make a smooth transition, we need to introduce these increased demands in ways that are in line with 4th graders' common developmental characteristics. A myriad of teaching strategies can help us set these excited, industrious, and often nervous students up for success. This article looks at one especially important area—the classroom environment—and explores how consistent routines and a

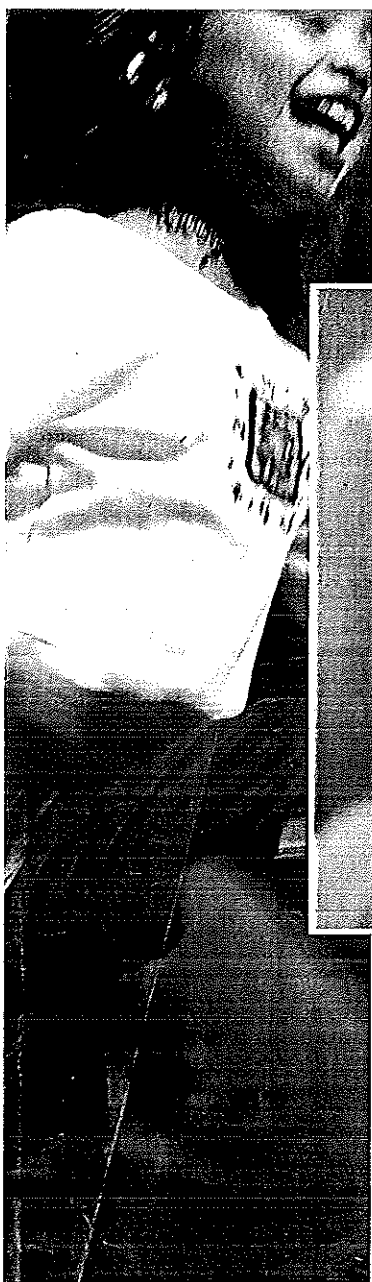


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sense of community can help create an environment that meets 4th graders' needs.

Establishing Schedules and Routines

Schedules and routines are good for students of any age and grade, but especially for typical 4th graders, with their inclination toward anxiety. I remember racing

in from recess every day when I was in 4th grade, sliding to a stop at my teacher's feet, ready for our daily read-aloud. This kind of predictability can help 4th graders settle into productive rhythms at school. Starting the day with a morning meeting; having consistent times for reading, writing, math, science, and other content areas; ending each day with a closing circle; and creating other predictable patterns help 4th graders relax and focus on learning.

When setting up the daily schedule, it's important to consider pacing and stamina. Although many 4th graders have incredible amounts of energy, this energy often comes in short bursts. We can capitalize on this rhythm by structuring lessons that balance sitting and listening with active participation. Consider a three-part lesson structure: (1) several minutes of direct teaching, (2) a work period in which students practice and apply the lesson, and (3) a brief wrap-up time for students to share their work. Also, consider

learning activities (like moving from table to table to solve math problems) can help students stay more energized as they work.

Teaching and Practicing Routines

At the beginning of my career, I was so eager to get to the "good stuff" of writing workshop, science experiments, and math that I often neglected to teach routines that my students needed to successfully navigate the classroom. I remember saying to the class, "OK everyone. You're in 4th grade. You know how to line up quietly. Go ahead and line up for recess."

Guess what? It didn't work. Maybe we all had different ideas of what quiet meant. (Does it mean silent? Can students talk? Should they whisper?) Maybe they had a variety of teachers in previous years who all had different line-up routines. Whatever the reason, I ended up spending incredible amounts of time and energy dealing with disruptions, accidents, and misbehavior. I realized that for 4th graders to be successful with classroom routines, I was going to need to teach them and give them chances to practice.

"Routines to Teach" (p. 34) shows some of the many routines that students should learn at the beginning and end of the day and during key transition times.

Interactive Modeling

One of the best ways to teach classroom routines is through interactive modeling. This strategy enables students to think

alternating quiet times of focused, individual work (such as reading workshop) with more active hands-on periods (such as a science lesson).

It's also important to build movement into the day. Students need to move, but all too often we require them to sit too long. Placing a 10-minute snack or recess break in the middle of a long morning can boost productivity for the rest of the morning. A two-minute active game or energizer can get oxygen moving to students' brains to fuel a more productive math lesson.

Building movement into

Routines to Teach		
Beginning of the Day	Bathroom, Snack, and Recess	End of the Day
Hanging up coats	Signing out to use the bathroom	Recording homework
Passing in homework	Eating snacks at the appropriate time	Packing backpacks
Signing up for lunch	Cleaning up snacks	Doing afternoon jobs
Turning in notes from parents	Lining up for recess	Getting coats, hats, and gloves
Starting morning work	Bringing play equipment outside and then back inside	Remembering where to go after school
Gathering for morning meeting	Pushing in chairs	Gathering for closing circle

about, observe, discuss, and practice routines in a short amount of time before they need to perform them independently. “Steps for Interactive Modeling” (p. 36) illustrates how a teacher might teach a group of students how to carry a chair safely. Here are some key points.

Clearly articulate routines for yourself. Often, students don’t know what to do because we haven’t quite figured it out ourselves. “Pass the scissors carefully” isn’t specific enough. What does “carefully” mean? First, we need to figure out what we want the behavior to look like. Then we can teach students the routine.

Keep expectations high. Once you’ve modeled the right way to pass scissors, hold students to it. When we enforce high standards of behavior after teaching students what they need to know, they feel safe.

Make sure expectations are realistic. It’s common for schools to institute policies like “no talking in the hallways.” The funny thing is, teachers often can’t even follow that rule! If we want students to use quiet voices (which is much more realistic than silence), then let’s model and practice using quiet voices and then follow through on that expectation.

Provide ongoing support. Interactive modeling is a crucial first step in teaching routines, but we can’t just teach something once and then expect students to do it independently. Stu-

dents need reinforcement when they’re doing something well (“James, I saw you pass the scissors carefully to Tamika, just the way we practiced it”); frequent reminders (“OK everyone, before we start our math projects, let’s remember how to pass the scissors carefully”); and repeated chances to review and practice.

Building Community

Building strong 4th grade learning communities can be both joyful and challenging. It’s always worth the investment of time and energy. When

Fourth graders can sometimes take themselves a bit too seriously.

students feel safe taking risks, trust one another, and know how to ask one another for help and how to disagree in respectful ways, they are more able to relax and fully engage academically. Because 4th grade is a time when both academic expectations and student anxieties tend to rise, creating safe and collaborative learning communities is vital.

There are many aspects of building strong 4th grade learning communities. Let’s look at three.

Teacher Tone and Demeanor

There’s no doubt that teachers have a huge role to play in setting the overall tone of the classroom. When we are stressed, our students are stressed. When we relax, our students can relax. Especially with sensitive 4th graders, teacher demeanor is incredibly important. Consider the following ideas.

Minimize competition. Many 4th graders are hypercompetitive, and it might appear to make sense to capitalize on this trait to motivate them. My experience, however, is that competition often has the reverse effect. Games that end in one student or one team winning (and everyone else losing) can be crushing for 4th graders and can lead some to shut down for the rest of the day.

When designing learning tasks or games, we should emphasize cooperation instead of competition. For example, suppose you want to have a scavenger hunt around the room to find examples of quadrilaterals. Instead of having students compete against one another, create a class cooperative challenge: “You have five minutes to find as many quadrilaterals as you can. Let’s see how many we can gather as a class!” You can also minimize competition by modeling what it looks like to handle defeat gracefully.

Be explicit about the importance of community. “To feel safe sharing our

writing with one another, we need to have a strong classroom community.”

This kind of statement by a teacher helps 4th graders understand why community is so important. This isn’t something we should keep secret.

Keep things light. Fourth graders can sometimes take themselves a bit too seriously. We can help them lighten up by being light ourselves. Laugh. Play. Be a little goofy while still modeling self-control and focus. A teacher’s lively sense of humor can go a long way toward helping 4th graders relax and enjoy school.

Getting to Know You

At the beginning of the year, it’s vital to help 4th graders make connections and form a cohesive community. Fourth grade can be a time of cliques, exclusion, and teasing. Helping students get to know one another well can reduce these problems. The following ideas can help.

Getting-to-know-you activities. At the beginning of the year, it’s a good idea to spend significant time on activities that are fun and engaging, are accessible for all students, help students make personal connections, and help you learn about students’ social and academic abilities. For example, you might create a gigantic jigsaw puzzle and have each student decorate a piece in a way that tells something about themselves. The puzzle can then be reassembled and displayed on a wall of the classroom. Another idea is to create a class scavenger hunt in which students interview one another to find out who likes

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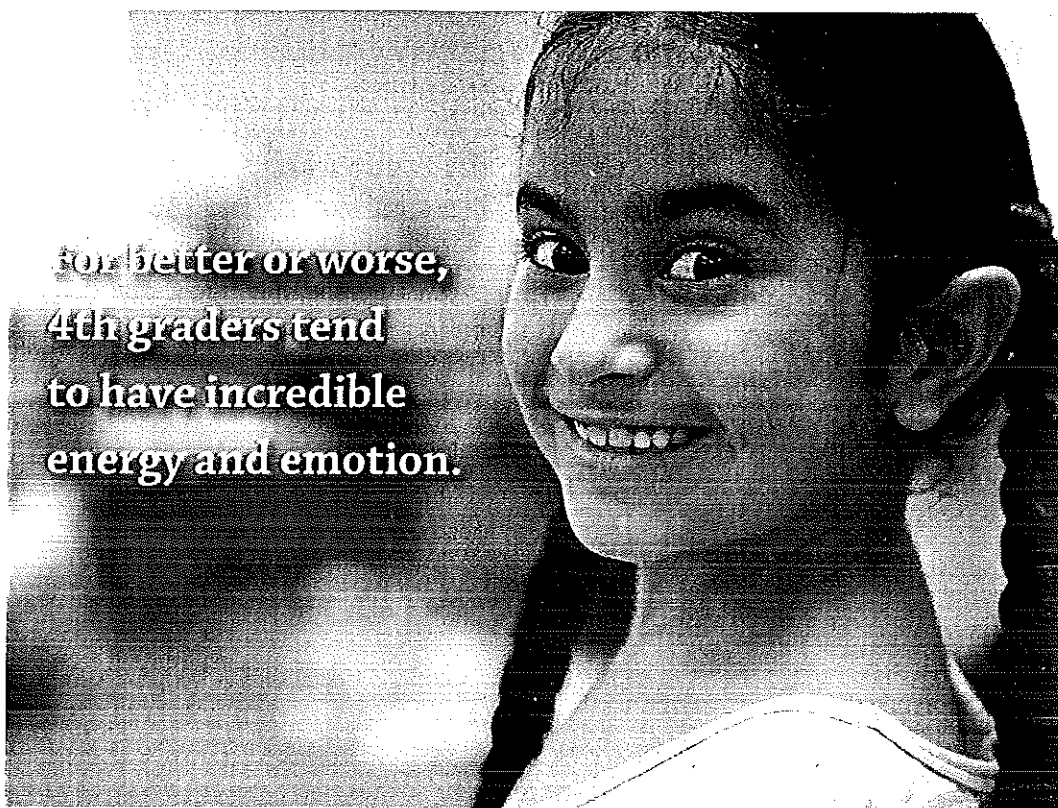


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soccer, who speaks another language at home, who has a younger sister, and so on. One year, I gave students their very own “wall space” to showcase interests, strengths, and pictures of their families.

Morning meeting. Beginning each day with a morning meeting in which students greet one another in a friendly way, have the chance to share some social or academic news, participate in a cooperative activity, and preview the academic content of the day is a great way to help students deepen their sense of community throughout the year. For more information, see *The Morning Meeting Book* by Roxann Kriete (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2002).

Class celebrations. Learning celebrations at the end of an academic unit can help showcase students’ growth and achievement. For example, at the end of a writing unit on poetry, families can come to a poetry slam in which students read selected poems they have written.

At the end of a long unit, consider having a Friday game day, in which students play a variety of fun games like Monopoly, Sudoku, and Yahtzee. Structure the day so that students play with a variety of classmates.

The Middle of the Day

“Mr. Anderson! It’s no fair! Jenny said we were going to be partners in four square today, and then she kept getting me out!” announces Jamila tearfully as she enters the classroom after lunch. All too often in 4th grade, teachers spend lots of time setting students up for success in the classroom but neglect lunch and recess. Predictably, lunch and recess often become flash points for misbehavior, hurt feelings, teasing, and exclusion. Because 4th graders can have an especially rough time with these issues, teachers need to structure lunch and recess and guide students effectively.

Teach lunchtime routines. Even if you

Steps for Interactive Modeling	
Steps to Follow	Might Sound/Look Like
1. Describe a positive behavior you will model.	1. "When we carry our chairs in the classroom, we need to be safe. Watch while I carry this chair."
2. Model the behavior.	2. Carry the chair safely. You do not need to narrate as you model.
3. Ask students what they noticed.	3. "What were some ways I was carrying the chair safely?" (If necessary, follow up with questions such as, "What were my hands doing?" and "What were my eyes doing?" to prompt students to list the important elements: used both hands, looked at the chair legs so they don't poke somebody, and so on.)
4. Ask student volunteers to model the same behavior.	4. "Who else would like to show us how to carry a chair safely?"
5. Ask students what they noticed.	5. "What were some ways that Tom carried the chair safely?" The children name specific safe behaviors that Tom demonstrated.
6. Have the class practice.	6. "Now we're going to practice carrying our chairs safely from the circle to our seats. I'll be watching you do all the things we just practiced."
7. Provide feedback.	7. "We were carrying chairs safely! I saw chair legs pointing down, and all of you were using two hands and looking around you as you walked!"

Note: Interactive modeling is one of 10 classroom practices developed by Responsive Classroom (www.responsiveclassroom.org).

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don't have lunch duty, you can still teach students how to navigate the cafeteria at the beginning of the year. Take your class down a bit early for lunch and make sure each student knows how to pay for lunch, how to carry a tray carefully, and how to find his or her seat. In the classroom, during snack time, you can model and practice how to clean up tables and how to wrap up uneaten food for later.

Assign seats. At the beginning of the year, assign seats for lunch to eliminate the jockeying that often creates hurt feelings and leads to lunches spilled on the floor as kids dive for the seats they want. Later in the year, students can have more choice—once they're ready for it.

Promote conversation. What super power would you choose if you could have any one? If you could go anywhere in the world for a day, where would you

go? If you won the lottery, what would you do with the money? Posting conversation starters like these on lunch tables can give students something to talk about. You can also brainstorm conversation topics in class and have students bring the list to the lunchroom.

Teach recess. That's right—*teach* recess. Consider the skills that students need to use on the playground: how to join a game that's already in progress, how to ask a friend to play, where the boundaries of the playground are, how to use equipment appropriately, how to solve a dispute, what to do if you see teasing, and so on. When we take the time to teach and practice these skills and then make sure we're present (not chatting with colleagues, but really supervising) on the playground, 4th graders will be better able to handle the increasing social challenges they face as they get older.

An Amazing Year

These ideas just scratch the surface of setting 4th graders up for success. Fourth grade can be an amazing year of learning in which students gain greater command of an increasingly complex and mature set of social and academic skills—if teachers take the time to get to know their 4th grade students, understand their common characteristics, and plan and teach accordingly. **■**

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