

3rd Grade Academics: What To Expect

Students in 3rd grade are meeting higher academic expectations and learning more complex concepts in school.

by Patti Ghezzi

Grade 3 is a transition year. Reading passages get more challenging. Sentences are longer. Vocabulary words are tougher. Math concepts—such as those ubiquitous multiplication tables—require memorization as well as complex thought.

Teachers expect 3rd grade students to take more responsibility for their education, speaking out when they don't understand something and devising strategies for learning that work best for them. And in some states, promotion from 3rd grade to 4th grade depends on students passing a standardized test.

It's enough to make some parents sweat a little. But kids who have a solid foundation from the earlier grades will do well with support, encouragement, and clearly stated high expectations.

"Academically, it has always been a rigorous year," says Nancy Davenport, president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals and a former 3rd grade teacher. "There is a lot more going on in 3rd grade now than when I was in 3rd grade."

Educators have learned over the years that children at this age can handle higher academic expectations. "We do so much more with computers in schools today," she says. "We use them as part of the instructional program."

Spelling Counts

In language arts, students will be expected to read with confidence, infer meaning that may not be explicitly stated, and figure out unfamiliar words using phonics, context clues, and other strategies. Third grade is the year of comma and semicolon, the year of subject and predicate, the year of pronoun and adverb. Students will be expected to break down a sentence, identify its parts, and make it stronger by adding just the right adjective.

Your child will be expected to write a well-formed paragraph. Spelling errors the 2nd grade teacher might have overlooked will be costly this year. Expect your child's teacher to be a stickler for correct punctuation and neatness, too.

Yet as the expectations rise, it's important to show your child that the joy in reading and writing increases, as well. Your child will have the skills to truly express herself in her journal and will be excited to devour the next book in a series. He'll be able to select books to read for pleasure based on his interests; he will want to finish the mystery to find out the ending. In short, even as reading and writing get more challenging, they also pay dividends in the form of greater satisfaction.

Math Is a Journey

For 3rd graders and their parents, math can be intimidating. Most teachers still require students to memorize the multiplication tables, but they also expect students to understand how multiplication relates to addition, subtraction, and division.

"The trend is to let kids solve problems," says Gay Dillin, spokeswoman for the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and a former 3rd grade tutor. "Until you understand the why, you don't really own it." Multiplication, she would tell her students, is really just fast addition.

This type of learning, known in some schools as constructionism, places more emphasis on the journey toward a correct answer than the answer itself. This can pose problems for parents who remember 3rd grade math as a rote subject. The key, experts say, is to jump in and help your child figure out a problem together. And don't be surprised if your child ends up teaching you a thing or two.

Besides multiplication, your child's math curriculum may include decimals, fractions, and adding and subtracting three-digit numbers. It's important to make sure your child keeps pace. The curriculum at this level has a spiraling effect, with every concept building on the previous one. If you suspect that your child is falling behind, act quickly to address the issue with his teacher.

Science, Social Studies Still Matter

With so much attention on language arts and math, it's hard to fit in science or social studies. But expectations are still high in these areas. Often these subjects will be integrated into the reading and math curricula, though they will probably also be taught and tested as standalone subjects.

In science, students may be expected to learn the parts of plants and animals and their life cycles and to understand dinosaurs and the concept of extinction. The curriculum varies state to state, but many 3rd graders will also begin to explore physical science, dabbling in gravity and magnetism. Don't be surprised if your child is introduced to lab

science through hands-on experiments. Encourage science exploration within your community, while on vacation, and through museums and other local resources.

Social studies lessons vary widely by location, as well. Many students will conquer a major social studies unit, such as the Roman empire. They may be expected to tackle a social studies project, such as a short research paper or presentation. At this age, social studies includes more history, with an emphasis on historical figures and their contributions to society.

Parents can support their children by showing an enthusiasm for what their child is learning and a willingness to help them learn more. It's also helpful to discuss age-appropriate current events with your child and to point out connections between the past and the present.

In 3rd grade, it's more important than ever for parents to keep a positive attitude about school. It may get more challenging to balance encouragement of your child with high academic expectations. This year may be the first time your child struggles a bit in school. Responding with support and a belief that your child can do the work will set a positive tone for your child's ongoing school career.

For more information, read ["3rd Grade Social Changes: What To Expect"](#)