



Third Grade — Energy and Imagination

Lots of enthusiasm; little sense of limits

*Important things to know about —
Making the most of the third-grade year*

- What's going on with third graders.
- Breaking big ideas into small, manageable parts.
- How parents and families can help.

What to expect from your third grader

Quick, quick, hurry, hurry! The eight-year-olds have hit the school — and your life — like a whirlwind! At home or at school, eight-year-olds are likely to be outgoing, energetic, and “all over the map.” The chart on the back page shows some of the changes going on in your busy, lively third grader. It's an action-packed year!

Their ideas, their vocabularies, their circle of friends are all expanding very quickly. They are interested in everything, often in many different things all at the same time, but asking them to sit still for long is like trying to capture a sunbeam.

Their imaginations are always working overtime. It's normal for eight-year-olds not to light down in one place for long. Like butterflies, they flit from project to project. They always seem to have a great new plan for something fun to do. By the time you've figured out what they are excited about now, they've probably moved on to the next wonderful new idea!

So — take a deep breath, and enjoy the flashes of color, laughter, and chattiness as they dash by. The world of the eight-year-old can be a *really* fun place. All you need to do is give them lots of love, make sure they get lots and lots of healthy outdoor activity to release all that energy, and gently set some limits and boundaries.

Turning big ideas into step-by-step plans

Limits? Oh dear, did we mention that kids this age don't understand limits? And they don't take to them too kindly either!

Third graders have great big dreams and schemes — and only the vaguest ideas about how things really happen or how much time and effort things really take. That's all right. It's our job as caring adults to show them the realities of limits and boundaries, including limits on their time and activity.

One of the best ways we can teach third graders about limits and boundaries is to talk about *steps* and *sequence*. Your comments about what is going to happen first, then second, then third will help your child learn to look at what is realistic and possible and then to break a big idea into smaller and more manageable pieces that can be tackled in a logical order. The important goal for parents is to make opportunities for small, step-wise successes.

For example, your third-grader may burst in with a plan: “For Grandma's birthday I'm going to make her the best dinner she ever had, and there can be the most beautiful cake, and we'll decorate the table and even the whole house!” Wow! As parents our job is to encourage the overall idea and at the same time talk about what's possible, how long it will take, and what needs to happen when.

So you may start with: “Sounds like fun and I know Grandma will love it! Let's see, today is Wednesday and her birthday is Saturday, that means you have four days to get ready. Let's make a calendar and write down what to do each day. Today you can plan the menu, tomorrow we'll make the grocery list and go shopping, on Friday you can draw special place-mats and pictures, then Saturday morning you can

pin up the pictures, and Saturday afternoon we can cook and bake together.”

Put the steps into sequence. Then at each milestone, praise your enthusiastic eight-year-old for each step she has completed, and remind her how it fits into the big picture: “Your placemats are wonderful, and Grandma will like those bright colors when you put them on the table tomorrow night.”

If your child suddenly loses interest, that’s probably a signal that she has gotten overwhelmed. Words like “I’m bored” or “this is dumb” really mean “this feels like too much, this feels too hard for me.”

When that happens, help her re-focus by breaking the step into even smaller parts.

Third graders may seem to give up easily, but they will bounce back with that wonderful enthusiasm if you can show them how to break a big idea or big process into *short, small, step-by-step* bits.

How parents and families can help third graders thrive

Third grade is also a good time for parents to help their children practice making decisions — and then living with the results of those decisions. You can suggest two choices of action, explain what will happen as a result of each choice, then let your child decide. Keep the choices pretty simple and focused on the situation right at hand. And, of course, make sure that you follow through with the results you described. Setting up choices helps your children learn about cause-and-effect and also about how to make decisions on their own.

Your third grader will probably have a little more homework than you saw during first and second grade. This is a good year for practice, practice, practice in handwriting and drawing as well as in arithmetic skills. Respect that homework. Building good homework habits now will bring amazing benefits later on! Here are a few ways you can help:

- Make sure your child has a regular time and place to do homework, with few distractions.
- Breaking homework time into shorter chunks might help if your child gets frustrated.
- When your child is working on homework assignments, be a role model by reading or doing something constructive yourself.

- Ask about the assignments and praise what your child has accomplished: “Great, you finished the arithmetic worksheet! Can you show me how you worked those problems?”

Other skills you can help your child practice at home are using clocks and calendars, using common household measuring tools, and making charts to collect data. Keeping a chore chart, for example, helps your child practice responsibility, learn how to record and display information, and set and reach a goal that you can celebrate: “Good for you! You made your bed every day this week. That means we can read an extra story tonight!”

Again, the goals for parents and caring adults are to make opportunities for many small, step-by-step successes and to be the cheering section when the child achieves each step. And don’t forget to enjoy this wonderful whirlwind year!

Characteristics of a typical eight-year-old

Physical	Growth spurt is likely. A lot of restless energy but gets tired easily. Needs plenty of outdoor time. Can be a little clumsy. Fine-motor control is getting better – handwriting starts to improve: a good age for writing and drawing practice.
Mental / Academic	Trying a lot of different things at once — awareness of the world is expanding. Limited attention span and strong tendency to “bite off more than they can chew.” Big ideas, big plans. Very talkative, vocabulary is expanding rapidly. Needs help breaking tasks and activities into small parts for success and motivation.
Social	Likes to be in groups, mostly of own gender. Is productive and cooperative in group work. Starting to form larger friendship groups.
Emotional	Very energetic and enthusiastic. Little sense of limits and boundaries. Not much patience. May feel inadequate when something doesn’t come easily right away. Strong sense of fairness. “I’m bored” usually means “this is too hard, I’ll never get this right.”

Based on *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4 – 14* by Chip Woods, NE Foundation for Children, Turner Falls, MA, rev. ed. 2004.

Ask your child—

How long do you think it will take to do that?

What will you need to do first?

Discouraged? Let’s go look at your plan again.