

# Anatomy of a First Grader

## All of Me

**It's hard to focus with so many thoughts bubbling in my head.**  
My ability to focus on the details is improving, but my big imagination and limited attention span sometimes make it hard. Organized, routine-based environments make it easier to stay on track. But remember, I still need time to share my big ideas and to let my imagination run wild.

**Play—it's still my first love language.**  
Help me engage in my classwork by providing fun routines, such as songs for transition, chants and rhymes, teamwork activities, and games. I may be growing up fast, but weaving a little play into learning goes a long way.

**I am a calorie-burning machine!**  
Healthy meals and snacks are essential for brain and body power, and I need to refuel often. I'm growing in important ways—I'll lose at least two or three baby teeth this year, and I'm becoming longer and leaner, transitioning from a "baby body" to a "big kid body."

**Learning so much can leave me exhausted at the end of the week!**  
For some, the transition from kindergarten to first grade is as major as the initial transition from preschool to kindergarten. I'm moving, learning, and thinking so much—I may even fall asleep in the car on the way home from school!

I'm observing the big kids, but I still feel little. Sometimes, I might prefer to do tasks that a preschooler would do. Sometimes, I might even act like a baby! Be patient with me as my abilities and preferences are forming.

## What's Important to Me

“First graders are asked to work with more difficult material and may feel like they are struggling for the first time in their lives. These new situations can sometimes lead normally confident children to feel unsure about their abilities. Previously, they have been “masters” at whatever they did. First graders need to be surrounded with excitement and encouragement, and given examples of how we learn from mistakes.”

**Being “Big”**  
It seems like everyone all around me is growing and learning. I wonder how long it will take before I am as tall as my teacher, as strong as my Dad, or as smart as the fifth graders who are always checking out those thick, fat chapter books from the library.

**Family Ties**  
I know where I come from, and I know where I've been. I'm so proud of my culture and the things my family does. I can tell you all about my sister's quinceañera. When it's my aunt's cousin's brother's birthday, I'll be sure to let you know. Celebrating families and cultures is a fun, engaging activity for me at this age.

**Cause and Effect**  
I'm aware that my actions affect others, and I'm quick to point it out when I see it. Sometimes this looks like tattling (and sometimes it is). But more often than not, I'm pointing out the causes and effects that I observe.

**Playtime**  
Unstructured free play helps me develop critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities. Even though I'm older, I still need plenty of unstructured playtime every day.



Many thanks for the contributions of  
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## My Brain and My Behavior

### My three brains

#### Human: Learning Brain

- Talking
- Thinking
- Listening
- Playing
- Cooperating
- Reasoning
- Creating
- Loving

#### Mammal: Feeling Brain

- Whining
- Clinging
- Ordering
- Hurrying
- Not Listening
- Nervous Laughing
- Resisting
- Crying

#### Reptile: Fearing Brain

- |              |                        |
|--------------|------------------------|
| <b>Fight</b> | <b>Flight</b>          |
| • Kicking    | • Running Away         |
| • Biting     | • Avoiding Eye Contact |
| • Screaming  | • Shutting Down        |
| • Hitting    |                        |
| • Spitting   |                        |



### What I need in each brain

#### Human: Learning Brain

- Information
- Guidance
- Appreciation
- Appropriate Physical and Mental Challenges

#### Mammal: Feeling Brain

- Connection (non-verbal)
- Protein Snacks
- Water
- Playing and silliness
- Time to Rest / Reflect

#### Reptile: Fearing Brain

- Calm
- Comfort
- Connection
- Physical and Emotional Safety

### Getting back to my human brain

#### Human: Learning Brain

Green means GO! So go, go, go for it! This is the brain that we all know and love and is the place where learning, socializing, empathy and moral development take place.

#### Tips for going the distance with a student who's “online” and raring to go, go, go...

##### Model

Teach and wire their brains by example.

##### Play

Use your imagination, your words, and a playful attitude to deliver information. Sing about respect. Make up games to teach kindness. Everyone wins when you bring play and fun into learning.

##### Appreciate

Let them know how much you appreciate who they are and what they are doing. Give them lots of yesses and celebrate when they exemplify their learning. Feed more energy into what's working and desired behaviors, and focus less on what's not working or undesired.

#### Mammal: Feeling Brain

Children in their mammal brain need some adult assistance. They need help getting regulated and can't do it themselves. This area of the brain is full of feeling and doesn't process language, so all the best teaching and advice will literally fall on deaf ears. Your student's brain simply can't hear it.

#### Tips for helping a “mammal child” get back in the green...

##### Slow Down

When you start to sense that one or more of your students are slipping, get low and slow with your body, your voice and your overall energy. Sure, it's tempting to want to get on top of it so it doesn't spiral out of control, but less is more when dealing with a mammal.

##### Reflect

Empathy is your best tool when students are heading south in their brains. A simple and heartfelt, “I hear you” or “I see you're having a hard time” goes a long way when someone is stressed and feeling vulnerable.

##### Zip it

Beyond simple words of reflection, talking will only add to the dysregulated state that a person is feeling when they slip into their mammalian brain. Remember, “eye-to-eye, skin-to-skin, heart-to-heart” when children are in this brain state. Less talking, more being.

#### Reptile: Fearing Brain

Facing a “Red-Head”? The key to helping regulate a child that has slipped into his or her lowest brain is STOP, DROP, and ROLL. The key here is to help the child feel safe. Whether you see the danger or not, something has tripped this child into feeling the need to fight, flee, or freeze.

#### Tips for calming, cooling, and connecting with a fearful brain.

##### Stop

When you start seeing reptile brain behaviors, stop. There's a fire blazing in that person's brain and adding words or trying to control them is only going to add fuel to the fire. Step back, make sure they are safe, and make space.

##### Safety First

Communicate safety. Quietly say, “You are safe. You don't feel safe, but you are safe.” Then make space but stay close. This is the best way to help someone come back to balance once they go over the brain waterfall.

##### Regulate Yourself

When someone slips into his or her reptile brain it means they are very dysregulated. What they need most is for another person to help them back to steady ground. You can do this by first, “putting the oxygen mask on yourself,” just like on an airplane. Take a few deep breaths, remind yourself that you are safe, and realize that their behavior is about them, not you. The more regulated your brain is, the more easily and effectively you can help a child get back online.



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/going-to-school/grade-by-grade/first/>