

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE KEYBOARDING CLASS

Secondary school keyboarding teachers, used to a certain amount of maturity in their middle or high school students, are in for a big surprise from the very first day they undertake to teach keyboarding to a group of early elementary children. They quickly learn, “Don’t assume anything; don’t take anything for granted.”

This article aims to help the secondary school teacher understand what makes elementary school children tick, and provides tips and strategies on how to use that understanding to teach keyboarding in the early grades. The section, “About elementary students,” reveals characteristics of elementary school youngsters and how they differ from older students. “Setting the stage” tells about arrangements to be undertaken in the classroom itself. “Keyboarding instruction” contains some ideas of how to begin this teaching assignment. The “Motivation” section suggests ways to make keyboarding instruction one of the highlights of a student’s day in school. “Involving others” tells about that all important task of integrating parents and other school personnel into the keyboarding program.

About elementary school students

When teaching keyboarding to elementary school students it’s important that you understand them. For example, *they will do exactly what you want them to do if you demonstrate and give explicit directions. It is important that you keep all promises that you make*—sometimes older children forget those promises, but early elementary children don’t forget. The children will have a *limited attention span*; therefore it’s a good idea to vary the instructional pattern frequently.

There’s no holding back with early elementary children. They will tell you whatever is on their mind. Many of them want attention and will monopolize all of your instructional time if you let them. *Make sure to give equal treatment to all.* If you help one student, other students may get jealous. Plan to spend some time with each student in the class. Children always want to be first—whether it’s for reciting, lining up to return to their classrooms, or receiving extra help—so be prepared to rotate turns. Provide opportunities for each member of the class to be first for something.

In the early stages of instruction it’s a good idea to provide frequent rest periods from keyboarding. To fill in the time of the rest period prepare language arts activities such as spelling out items for them to find in the classroom, or other exercises to rest their hands.

Young students will be “assistant teachers” in the classroom, whether you want them to be or not. In fact, it is likely you will have as many assistants as you have students. Sometimes their assistance is welcome, but most of the time you’ll have to remind them to complete their own assignments.

There is a direct relationship between the weather and student behavior. If it rains and the students haven’t had time to expend energy on the playground, consider introducing some new routines. There is also a direct relationship between the time of day and the day of the week for optimum keyboarding instruction. Aim for midmorning instructional time. If that’s not possible, try for the time following lunch. Try not to settle for the time directly before lunch (their minds are on food and not on keyboarding) or at the very end of the school day when many students are mentally exhausted.

Setting the stage

If possible, try to have one type of equipment in the keyboarding classroom. However, if this is not possible, good results are possible even if you have combinations of different kinds of computers or computers and typewriters (electric or electronic). Rotate children on the equipment to avoid jealousy.

Be sure that students have their own disks to use at the computer. These disks should be stored in a unit something like the compartments used to store compact disks. Students could also have their own folders in a filing cabinet to keep their printouts or papers from their typewritten work at the typewriter.

Select a very simple word processing program. In that way children can easily learn how to insert words, save, or print what they have keyed.

Keyboarding Instruction

The elementary school teacher should maintain a gentle but firm and quiet, manner. Don't spend too much time on instructions and explanations of the parts of the typewriter or computer. What the children want to do most is to use the equipment. Instead, on the first day of the keyboarding class, have the typewriter or computer all set to go—paper already in the typewriter and a word processing program already loaded in the computer. Gather the students around a demonstration machine and show them exactly where to rest their fingers for the home row position. Be especially careful to emphasize not holding down the key to avoid multiple characters. Use the analogy of curling your fingers like a cat's claws.

There are other suggestions for teaching keyboarding in an elementary school class.

- If adjustable chairs and desks are not available use thick books on the chairs to raise students to a proper position, and use cardboard or wooden boxes for foot rests. Consider that students who sit on their legs might be sending a signal that their chair is too low.
- Be sure to enunciate clearly—even spelling out difficult words. Note that students with learning disabilities have difficulty distinguishing between b and d, n and m, and so forth.

When it's time to begin the actual keyboarding instruction here are some tips:

- In the beginning stages of learning to keyboard, do save the material each day, but don't print out each day. If you have the luxury of having an aide in the classroom, perhaps material could be printed weekly by the aide until the children learn to print.
- Watch out for playful children who might turn off their computers before saving or printing—thus losing all their work. Encourage students who are using computers to save their work frequently.
- Do not penalize mistakes in the initial keyboarding learning process. Explain that everyone makes mistakes when their fingers are learning the locations of the keys. At the appropriate time, emphasize how easy it is to correct mistakes on the computer or typewriter. Spell and say directions from time to time so that you integrate language arts activities into your classroom instruction.
- Children love stories. After you have taught the new letters of the day, ask students to make up words using the new letter and all of the previous letters they have learned. Because some students are just learning cursive writing, print rather than write these words in columns on the board until you have 10 or 12 words. Make up a story using these words, then ask students to type the words.
- After the keyboard has been learned, the children can practice weekly spelling lists, type stories, and integrate classroom-related materials.

Motivation

- Young students enjoy receiving rewards for doing a good job. A colored star or a special stamp on their papers provides an essential pat-on-the-back and goes a long way to encourage excellence in the classroom. Another way to reward them is by leaving typed notes for students at their typewriter or computer. They love to have encouraging words to make them feel important.
- Establish a daily routine, and then add surprises. When you have finished teaching the keyboard, you might want to start out each day by having the class type a riddle or joke of the day. After you provide the first joke, students in the class will besiege you with their jokes to use in class.

Involving others

If at all possible, *try to have the children's classroom teacher in the keyboarding room to provide assistance and to experience the instructional activities you've provided the children.* Encourage the classroom teacher to use similar activities after you've left the school.

It's important that keyboarding work be sent home at regular intervals. Parents want to see what their children have been doing in class.

Make it a point to issue a standing invitation to parents or guardians to visit the keyboarding class at any time. Most parents will make a special effort to visit even if they work. If that isn't possible, grandparents, other relatives, or even babysitters can be invited. If there are some children who don't have anyone to come to see them in action, be sure to give them special attention and recognition so they won't feel left out.

Plan to have a graduation ceremony at the end of the class. Invite an administrator to give out diplomas to the class and serve some kind of refreshments to make it a really festive occasion.

Conclusion

Teaching elementary school children provides a special treat; they're easy to be with, they appreciate your spending time with them, they're honest and outspoken, and you may find that they will recharge your battery.

Editor's Note: Consider offering keyboarding instruction to elementary students during the summer. It is an ideal time to introduce keyboarding and to provide reinforcement activities.