

## 6th Grade Academics: What To Expect

*Students will be using more sophisticated thinking skills, interpreting and synthesizing the information they're learning.*

by Patti Ghezzi



Can you believe your child is halfway to graduation? It seems impossible that just six years ago, she was learning to write her name and to sit still during circle time. Now, in 6th grade, your child is barreling ahead, diving into statistics, research papers, and the scientific method. At many schools, grade 6 is also an opportunity to try out band, art, and even home economics (now commonly known as family and consumer sciences).

A major difference in middle school is that, in most cases, your child's teacher will be certified in a particular area. "Elementary school teachers are prepared to be generalists," says Al Summers, a former middle school science teacher who now directs professional development for the National Middle School Association. "In middle school, we're trained in our subjects of expertise."

In middle school, your child will have several teachers, all with different teaching styles and personalities. Ideally, all will have deep knowledge of their subject and a sense of the middle school child's developmental needs. Although the curriculum varies widely from state to state and from school to school, there are some general concepts you can expect your child to cover in each subject.

### Language Arts

Reading and writing has been a huge focus for your child since preschool, and now he will be expected to put all he's learned to good use. Expect your child to be reading a lot, especially biographies, and putting more of his thoughts on paper than ever before.

Your child's language arts teacher might give students more choices in what they read, more opportunities to select books from the library, and more latitude in finding a book that works for an assignment. In return, the student will be expected to actually read the book.

For some kids, reading is a struggle. They lack the focus, the motivation, and sometimes the basic reading skills. Parents should help their child figure out what the barrier is to successful reading and take steps to fix it. Expectations only increase as your child gets older.

### Social Studies

Many of your child's language arts lessons will also include a social studies component as he reads about other cultures, current events, and past leaders. At this age, your child will learn to distinguish between fact and opinion and will learn the importance of using multiple primary sources.

For millions of 6th graders, the curriculum will focus on ancient civilizations. While your child will be expected to recall some facts and timelines, today's social studies teachers tend to emphasize interpretation. Your teacher will want to see your child relate what happened in the past to what is happening in the present.

Support your child by engaging him in conversation about what he's studying in social studies. Just talking about such topics will help give your child the confidence to share his thoughts and opinions at school.

### Mathematics

Math can be a source of stress in 6th grade, but most students will do fine as long as they mastered the concepts taught in elementary school. Your child may encounter practice problems that look a lot like algebra. Geometry, probability, statistics, percentages, and graphing will also appear. Teachers will present the content in a way that is age-appropriate and not overwhelming.

"Back in the day, math at this stage was more about arithmetic," says Hank Kepner, president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. "Today, we're about

collecting data, measuring, and problem-solving....It looks different because math used to be more compartmentalized."

As are other subjects, today's math curriculum is less focused on following a set path to the correct answer and more focused on encouraging students to figure out their own path to not only get the right answer but also understand the underlying concepts. Students will also be expected to apply their knowledge of math through complex word problems.

Teachers are more excited about an "aha" moment when a student grasps an abstract concept than 100 percent accuracy on a homework assignment. "It's when they go 'Oh, I see,'" Kepner says. "You can see that spark in their eyes."

Parents may feel anxious about their child's math homework, especially if they didn't do well in math themselves or if they were taught using more traditional methods. The best way parents can help their child is to provide a place and a designated time to study but to resist the temptation to take over when their child needs help. Instead, try to solve the problem together and seek help from the teacher if necessary. Another strategy is for the parent to have the child explain, out loud, his thinking on how to solve a particular problem.

For students seriously struggling in math, parents and the teacher will need to backtrack to see where he got lost. He may have missed an important skill in elementary school. Once that skill is retaught, he may well be able to pick up again and never look back.

## Science

Sixth grade is a huge year for science education, setting the pace for the rest of middle school, high school, and beyond. The curriculum is able to take advantage of a child's increasing exposure to mathematical concepts and in turn introduce more complex science topics.

Your child may get exposed to lab science in 6th grade. Most states follow an inquiry-based model that encourages hands-on exploration. "Science is about discovery," Summers says. "We want students to discover things the way scientists do....Kids learn most effectively by doing, by hypothesizing, by exploring."

Parent can support their kids by talking about science at the dinner table. Endless ideas may be culled from newspapers, magazines, and the Internet.

Sixth grade is a year of changes for your child, from the school environment to the onset of puberty to a curriculum that demands active participation. Think of grade 6 as a springboard, launching your child into a middle and high school education that will carry her into the future.

For more information, read ["6th Grade Social Changes: What To Expect"](#)

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