

## Characteristics of Elementary Learners

Learners of any age need to belong, express themselves, and engage in challenging and meaningful work. Our elementary learners, those that are between the ages of 8-11, need all of those things and more to honor their developmental stage and promote their growth through pre-adolescence. As they progress through grades 3-5, students need more frequent opportunities built into academic work to “build independence and mastery, reflect on and take ownership of what and how they are learning, and connect their learning to real issues in the world related to social justice, human rights, and protecting the Earth.” (Woodfin & Plaut, 2017, p15)

### **Elementary learners thrive in both collaborative and competitive environments.**

Elementary learners benefit and enjoy activities that appeal to their desires to both collaborate and compete with peers. As students develop, they increasingly want to connect and socialize with peers within and beyond the classroom.

### **Elementary learners are flexible problem solvers.**

Curiosity about the world paired with a willingness to take risks and the ability to recover quickly from mistakes, make elementary learners primed to problem solve. They are able to identify problems, driven to find solutions, and receptive to change.

### **Elementary learners are concerned with fairness and justice, individually and collectively.**

As learners explore and better understand the environment they exist within and the greater world around them, their understanding of the concepts of right vs. wrong, fairness, and justice, on a micro and macro level, evolve. Starting with themselves and moving to their classroom, community, and beyond, students are able to identify issues related to inequity and injustice and seek to resolve them.

### **Elementary learners are energetic and hard-working and have a tendency to push themselves to their limits.**

Elementary learners have energy and enthusiasm. They excitedly take on new tasks and challenges, become deeply engrossed, expend mass amounts of both cognitive and physical energy, and then often deplete their energy sources swiftly. At this age, students work hard, play hard and also tire quickly, have a limited attention span, and can easily become overwhelmed. While they need an active classroom and compelling tasks, they also need support in managing their many ideas, tracking their thoughts, and breaking down complex tasks into bite-sized activities.

### **Elementary learners are eager for approval from peers and adults alike.**

Encouragement and approval are needed by elementary learners—from friends, classmates, and caring adults. As students progress through these developmental years, they become increasingly critical of themselves and seek affirmation from those around them. Socially, students are seeking connections, and their friend groups are expanding. Academically (and beyond), learners care about

the “right way” of doing things and want feedback, support, and approval related to not just outcomes but the process or actions that got them there.

**Elementary learners are curious about the world around them and seek to understand how things work.**

Rapid growth happens during these developmental years, as learners move from concrete to abstract thinking. As students move through this continuum, they seek to understand, connect, organize, and classify elements of the work. What they gain supports them in applying logic to activities, challenges, and problems.

**Elementary learners want to express themselves and share what they know.**

As learners shift from “reading to learn” to “learning to read,” their knowledge base and vocabulary are rapidly expanding, and learners want to share what they know. They are expressive, verbose, and want to show and tell. During these years, learners are developing impulse control; while this is developing, there may be many examples of students thinking about something and saying it aloud without first considering their audience.

**References:**

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