

Letters can be sent to parents or students. It's worthwhile to do both—to send separate notes to parents and to students—so that you begin building individual relationships with both groups. We've found that kids enjoy zippy postcards with handwritten, short notes. For parents, you may want to go beyond a quick, friendly introduction, and use the first letter to start building a vision of what your classroom curriculum and community will be like. For some families, this may be the first time they have received any form of personal communication from a teacher before the school year begins.

Letters That Invite Students Into the Classroom

Fourth-grade teacher Janet Nordfors sends a letter inviting all students and their families to an open house in her classroom on an evening just before the first day of school. Her goal is to let students choose their classroom space. Janet knows that upper-elementary students cherish their privacy and growing independence. So by giving them some say over storage space, desk arrangement, and room setup, she sends a strong signal about her sensitivity to their needs. Janet arranges desks in groups of four. When students visit her classroom, she introduces herself to put names to faces, and has students try out several seats to choose one that is suitably sized and located. From there, she has them make name tags to go on their desks.

Janet also shows students and parents around the room, telling them about the different sections such as the computer center, the homework cubby section, and the current events bulletin board. She shows students where to line up when they arrive each morning and after recess, so that they will not be confused or worried on the first day.

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from "The Back to School Book" by Suzanne Kaback, Constance Perry, and Brenda Power



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Suzy Kaback also uses a letter to invite students into the classroom before school starts. (See sample on pages 14 and 15.) Her goal is to help them begin to feel comfortable about the space before they enter it, and to develop a sense of ownership. In her letter, Suzy invites students to join her at the end of August when she's setting up the classroom for the year. Plenty of students take her up on the invitation. They help organize books on the shelves; tape classmates' names on cubbies, desks, and coat hooks; set up the listening area; arrange art supplies; and tidy up the garden tools to use in the window garden. All of this saves Suzy time, of course, but in the process the students also get to know the terrain.

When students walk in the door on the first day of school, there is an air of confidence about them—a feeling that this is **their** room. They know where to hang their backpacks. Many of them already have school supplies loaded in their desks. And students who were not able to help set up the classroom benefit from the relaxed attitude of their peers. They sense the message that “this is our place” and can ease into the beginning of the year, just like students who did volunteer.

Like Suzy and Janet, Jill Ostrow designates a time, usually a morning, during the week before school when her multi-age fourth to sixth graders come and get to know the classroom. Because her early teaching experience was in Britain, she uses the British model of having students take far more responsibility for setting up the classroom.

When students visit in late August, the classroom walls are bare, and the desks and tables are heaped in the middle of the room. Jill has students talk about room design, help organize the furniture, and sort through books to come up with a shelving system for the classroom library.

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Suzy Kaback's Letter to Students

Mrs. Kaback

Dear «student's name»,

Hello again! I'm glad we had a chance to meet on Set Up Day because now, as I write this letter, I have a clear picture of you in my mind. Luckily I have a good memory for faces! I think playing all those name games helped, too. We'll see how well you remember your new classmates' names on the first day of school, but don't worry if you've forgotten some because we have a whole year together to practice!

I hope you've had a great summer and that you're getting excited about fifth grade. I know you're going to think it's interesting, challenging, and quite comfortable now that the construction is finished at the school.

I usually send this Greetings Letter sooner than the week before school, but this summer Mr. Kaback and I traveled to Europe and didn't return until August 19. We visited two countries: Austria and Finland. In Austria, the people speak German and in Finland, they speak Finnish. I only speak English and a little French, so most of the time I was in the dark whenever I heard someone speak or tried to read a sign. Luckily, almost everyone in these countries speaks English, as well as their native language, so we survived!

I learned a few words to help me get by, such as "Guten Morgen" which means *good morning* in German and "Kiitos" (key-tows) which is *thank you* in Finnish. I also found out that in Finland, by the time most people reach ten years old, they can speak Finnish, Swedish, and English clearly. Wow!

I have plenty more stories to share about my trip and I'm looking forward to hearing about your summer. But now, I'm getting anxious to begin our school year and I'm certain you have questions about how to be ready for fifth grade.

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If you're going shopping before school starts, here is a list of basic supplies. If you've already purchased supplies that don't match the list, don't worry. Just bring what you have.

1 composition notebook

(These are usually black and white with no spiral binding.)

1 three-ring binder with one-inch or bigger rings

(Trapper Keepers are not large enough to hold 5 subjects)

1 math notebook

16 pocket folders

pens and pencils

You might also want to buy colored pencils, a ruler, and scissors, although we have these in the classroom already.

That's it for supplies. I'd also like you to bring a book you're reading. If you're not reading a book right now, start thinking about the kinds of books you like to read. We can look through the classroom library to find a good one for you.

If you've had any interesting story ideas this summer, bring those with you, too. Every year I write a story that features our class on a wild adventure of some kind. This year I plan to set the story in Europe with a thrilling train scene. I got plenty of plot ideas on my trip!

By the time you receive this letter, I'll be busy getting the classroom ready for everyone. If you're looking for something to do, stop by. I'll have plenty of jobs for volunteers! Just be sure to call school first at 555-7769 to make sure I'm there.

Enjoy your last days of vacation and start looking forward to next Tuesday. I know you're going to like the "new and improved" school and have a successful fifth-grade year.

I'll see you next week!

Yours Truly,

Mrs. Kaback

Letters That Invite Family Involvement

We've also found that summer is a great time to learn about students from their families. Parents often have unusual and important information to share about their children that might be easier to share through the mail, rather than during the hectic first days of school.

When Suzy Kaback sends out the letter described above, she also sends a separate letter to parents, encouraging them to share helpful information about their children. (See sample on pages 17 and 18.) Specifically, she asks parents to write a letter telling her what she shouldn't wait to find out about their child. Her letter makes it clear that the information should be positive. Troubled home lives, past difficulties in school, and peer problems are all important factors to know at some point, but not initially. Suzy wants parents to feel comfortable bragging about their kids. She also makes it easy for them to respond by enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Responses to this request disprove the negative notions many educators have about parent involvement in the upper-elementary grades. Suzy has never received responses from less than 90 percent of parents, and what treasures their letters prove to be! (See sample on page 19.) They always provide a sneak peek into the lives of her future students and a wealth of substantive comments for each child on the very first day of school.

Suzy Kaback's Letter to Parents

SUZY KABACK

Dear «parent's name»,

I hope this letter finds you and your family healthy and enjoying the summer. I clearly remember last summer's rain and cold temperatures, so I'm thankful that we're having such a wonderful season this year.

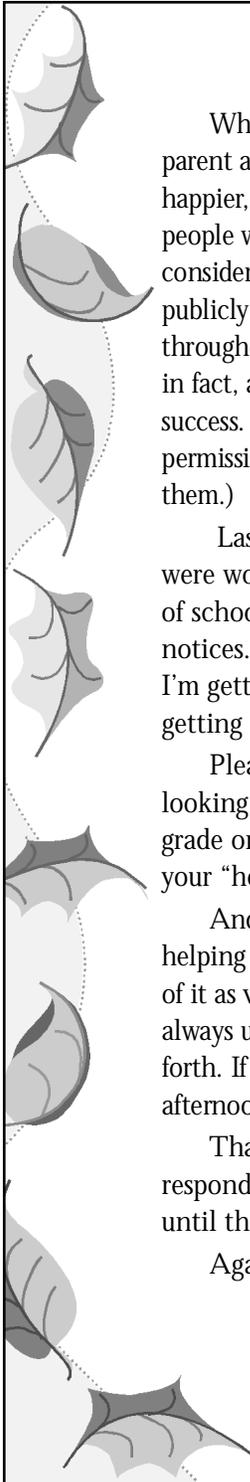
You may be surprised to be receiving a letter from "the fifth-grade teacher," so let me explain my purpose. In a few weeks, «student's name» will find a letter of his/her own in the mailbox, but this note is just for adults. I have some news and some requests that I'd like to pass along to you.

To begin, I'm writing to let you know my plans for the fall. As many of you know, my husband Steve and I are expecting our first child at the end of October. We're thrilled, of course, but we've had to make some plans about maternity leave. For the time being, I plan to teach as long as possible. Then, when the baby is born, I'll take a few weeks off. Mr. Russell and I will be working on hiring a substitute in the early fall and I can assure you that I will look for a qualified, dedicated replacement. Please feel free to share concerns, questions, or advice(!) with me.

Thinking about becoming a mom has certainly made me more aware of the impact parents have on the lives of their children, particularly as they enter school and are turned over to the care of another person for eight hours a day. I have, however, always been a supporter of home-school communication. So, within a few weeks, you'll start receiving weekly updates about our classroom and your child's progress. It is my hope that these notes will be the basis of a year's worth of dialogue between us. We'll discuss «student's name», what's happening in class, ways you can support his/her learning at home, and ways I can extend what you do at home in school.

My hope for this kind of ongoing dialogue leads me to my first request: Would you take a few minutes to jot down some thoughts about «student's name»? I'd like your message to be positive. What shouldn't I wait to find out about him/her? What are his/her greatest strengths, proudest achievements, favorite years in school? What will I notice about «student's name»? What are the things you like or admire most about

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Why am I asking you to do this? Well, I answer with another question: When a parent and a teacher communicate regularly about a child, does the child have a happier, more successful school year? On the surface it's a simple question that many people would answer with a quick "yes," but I think it deserves more deliberate consideration. A good teacher knows, however, that to make such a statement publicly takes some data. Therefore, I'd like to use any talking and writing we do throughout the year as the basis for a classroom research project that asks if there is, in fact, a connection between home-school communication and a child's school success. (Of course, all communication will be confidential, and I will request your permission for using any of our communications if opportunities arise to publish them.)

Last year I asked families to write these kinds of letters, and the results were wonderful! The only problem was that I made my request on the first day of school, and I think the letter got buried among the avalanche of other notices. Therefore, I didn't get the number of letters I'd hoped for. So, this year, I'm getting a head start on a home-school relationship, which is why you're getting this letter early!

Please write as much or as little as you'd like in the "Kid Notes." I'm just looking for that kernel of knowledge you can share with me to help start fifth grade on a confident note. I hope the self-addressed stamped envelope makes your "homework" a little easier!

And the final request: Might your soon-to-be fifth grader like to spend time helping to set up our classroom? Some would call it slave labor, but I like to think of it as volunteerism! I'll be in our room during the week prior to school and can always use help re-shelving books, hanging posters, creating bulletin boards, and so forth. If «student's name» is interested in coming to school for an hour or so one afternoon, let me know. It's a great bonding experience!

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter, and thanks in advance for responding to it. There's no rush to turn in the writing. If you don't get to it until the beginning of the school year, no problem.

Again, I wish you well and look forward to meeting you this fall.

Suzzy Kaback