



— DAY IN THE LIFE —

# SCHOOL RULES

LARCHMONT KINDERGARTENERS PROVE THAT THEIR FIRST FORMAL YEAR OF EDUCATION ISN'T ALL FUN AND GAMES

By Jessica Carlson

**K**indergarten, from what I remember, was a great year for me. I sat in many circles, played house regularly, ate Fruit Roll-Ups and did a lot of cartwheels. I also refused to wear pants, clean up, use zippers and talk to boys.

Thankfully, I've learned a lot since my first formal year of education and have acquired a taste for pants, zippers and boys quite nicely. Clean up time—not so much.

Regardless, you can imagine my excitement to relive my feelings of worry-free bliss and spend a day doing what all 5- and 6-year-olds in Hampton Roads do every day—play games and eat snacks. Or so I thought ...

## THE MORNING BELL

I arrive at Larchmont Elementary in Norfolk around 8:10 a.m., maneuvering around school buses and mini-vans in the parking lot. The school is an impressive brick building

**NAME:** Mrs. Holloman's Kindergarten Class

**ON THE JOB:** 10 months; then they're off to first grade.

**BEFORE THE JOB:** Preschool, play dates and lots of family time.

**OFF THE JOB:** Picking on siblings, watching cartoons, playing hide-and-seek, trying to outsmart Mom and Dad, and wishing they were taller.

with tall doorways and cathedral-like architecture. Built in 1929, Larchmont is one of the oldest schools in Norfolk's public school system.

Three lines of students extend from a mammoth doorway on one side of the building. As I approach, I meet Mrs. Holloman—my kindergarten teacher for the day. She is exact-

ly what you would expect a kindergarten teacher to be: kind, patient and smiling.

She introduces me to a few of her students, and I squeeze a place in line. Behind me, a messy-haired boy balances his backpack precariously on his head. In front of me, two girls chat about their weekend plans.

"So, when do we go inside?" I ask the girls, interrupting a quite sophisticated conversation about a cousin's birthday party. They inform me that we have to wait for the bell to ring.

When it does, the throngs of children outside squeeze through the door and scatter about to their respective classrooms. I follow my new kindergarten friends to a corner classroom at the end of a long hallway.

"At first our parents took us to the room," one girl says. "But then we learned."

It seems that they have learned a lot since the beginning of the year—the classroom



resembles a bustling and productive office with students walking in briskly, hanging up their coats, unpacking their backpacks, turning in their homework, and sitting down at their table without a wayward movement.

I write down my first reflection of the day in my notebook:

8:20 a.m.: Was I this smart in kindergarten?

## READING, WRITING AND MORE READING

Sometime in the next two hours, I begin to realize that the answer to the above question is an emphatic "No." At age 5, I was making shapes out of rubber bands, building Lego houses and baking pretend cupcakes. These Larchmont kindergarteners spend their school days actually reading, writing, adding and subtracting—and having fun while doing so.

Before class can begin, we fulfill our patriotic duties by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, singing as many words as we can remember from "You're a Grand Old Flag," and observing a moment of silence. It is nearly 8:30 a.m. when Mrs. Holloman invites us to the rug for shared reading time. The children read aloud as she points to each word.

While we read, two kindergarteners make their way to a computer desk in the back of the classroom. Each student takes turns playing reading and spelling games throughout the day, and while most sit quietly while wearing their oversized earphones, some just cannot contain the excitement of learning how to spell a new word.

"Kitchen sink!!" one boy exclaims loudly during group reading. I nearly fall off my chair. My classmates seem unfazed and continue reading.

We will read or write in some capacity for the next two hours, rotating through a series of stations set up throughout the classroom. Some read books quietly on their own, some practice writing on the chalkboard, and some listen to books on tape. I opt for the most popular activity, which entails cutting out a picture from a magazine, taping it on a piece of paper and writing about it.

All along, children at the computer continue their excited outbursts. "Penny loafers!" "Pecan pie!" "Buck tooth!"

While the students keep on reading, writing, spelling or listening, I just can't help laughing.

10:15 a.m.: I wonder when it's playtime?



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** In the first activity of the day, eager kindergarteners read aloud with their teacher, Mrs. Holloman. **ABOVE:** A teaching assistant helps one student improve his reading skills. All kindergarteners must be at a certain level to pass to first grade. **BELOW:** Writing a story about a picture cut out from a magazine is a class favorite and is usually reserved for Fridays.







The kindergarteners take turns playing exciting reading and spelling games on the computer.

## MORNING LUNCH

For most people, a meal at 10:40 a.m. is considered a late breakfast, brunch or mid-morning snack. Kindergarteners call it lunch. Because they share the cafeteria with grades 1–6, this schedule guarantees that they are first in line for chicken nuggets and chocolate milk.

As we make our way to the cafeteria, Mrs. Holloman invites me to the teachers' lounge to eat and visit with the other teachers. I decline, opting to sit with my fellow classmates instead.

"It can get pretty loud in here," she warns as we pick up our lunch trays and slide them along the metal counter.

Actually, I think to myself, deafening is probably a better way to describe it. Neverthe-

less, I do manage to carry on a conversation with an amazingly polite young girl, who repeats again and again how much she is enjoying my company as we eat. "It is just so great just to chat," she says. "I just *love* talking to you!"

Ms. Polite asks me to play Ms. Mary Mack, and I can't refuse. So we face each other, clapping and chanting, until we are interrupted by a sound I remember all too well—the dreaded "teacher voice."

"Nooooo moooooore patty-cake!!" yells one of the few adults in the cafeteria. And she's talking to me!

My polite young friend puts down her hands and shrugs her shoulders. The teacher moves on to a few rowdy boys at another table. I sit stunned.

10:55 a.m.: Note to self: Practice a teacher voice. Also, what's so bad about a little patty-cake?

## WORK HARD, PLAY HARD

After a morning spent reading and writing, my caffeine light is on and flashing; I am definitely running on low. But my shorter classmates seem to be having the opposite problem. When Mrs. Holloman opens the door for recess, the kindergarteners literally sprint in all directions with an amount of energy that caffeine could never supply.

I find solace in the shade of a tree and watch the chaos ensue. Kids chase each other down the slide, bury their legs in sand, do somersaults across the field, run in circles for no apparent reason, and examine suspect trees and bushes.

A boy from my class runs towards me at full speed and slides to a stop at my feet. "Come on, let's go run and tackle," he says.

I begin to politely decline, until I realize he is talking to another boy standing directly behind me, eyeing my notepad.

"Can you write my name on there?" he asks.

I assure him I will, and he quickly runs off without telling me what it is.

11:25 a.m.: Recess = running. And tackling, I guess.

## SERIOUS BUSINESS

Recess ends like it began. The kindergarteners enthusiastically sprint back into line and wait for Mrs. Holloman to lead them to the classroom. For the next 20 minutes, the class works on a writing activity until it is time for yet another way to allow these high-energy tots to unwind: physical education.

P.E. starts with a quick jog around the soccer field. Then, the kindergarteners sit cross-legged in the gymnasium while their teachers inform them about Field Day. "If you aren't prepared, you can't participate," warns one P.E. teacher with stern eyes.

This is serious business. Today's field day preparations include jumping rope to the "Macarena," dancing to "No More Monkeys Jumping on the Bed," and playing an intense round of scooter tag. Judging from their performance, I think these kindergarteners are geared up.

"You should do a day in the life of *me*," says one teacher as she stacks the scooters at the end of class. "My life is *real* interesting."

12:30 p.m.: How do teachers do this every day? (I love scooter tag!)

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## MATH AND LIFE LESSONS

At 1:15 p.m., the day takes a turn for the worst—math time. Like most English majors, math has never been my strong suit. And it becomes even more disconcerting when I realize that many of these kindergarteners can add and subtract faster than I can.

But things become interesting during an intense math game, when I get invited, uninvited and invited again to a classmate's birthday party.

"Keep your hands, feet and mean comments to yourself," the class says in unison as the birthday party host is escorted to the hallway for a time-out. What a simple yet perfect motto to live by, I think to myself.

As the day winds down, Mrs. Holloman introduces the final activity—a discussion about safety. She asks the class to name some dos and don'ts.

"Don't look at strangers," offers one student.

"Don't put anything in your mouth that's not food," says another.

And my personal favorite: "Never talk to strangers ... unless it is an animal."



Most of these kindergarteners have no trouble reading on their own.

At that, class is dismissed, and my friends meet their parents outside the classroom. I quietly head towards my car in the parking lot, secretly wishing my own mother was outside waiting to take me home, where I could make a few messes, do a little playing, and maybe even remove my pants.

3 p.m.: Besides eating snacks and playing a little patty-cake, kindergarten is not what I remember. But I do admire my new kindergarten friends (and their teachers) and predict a lot of bright futures ahead. They're certainly off to a great start. **HRM**



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