

Late Kindergarten Entry and Grade Retention Is Your Child Ready?

By Damon Korb, MD

As parents, we put so much pressure on ourselves to do the right thing for our children. We try to manage a healthy diet, set up play dates and coordinate beneficial extracurricular activities—arranging our lives around their schedules. We also make daily decisions for our children that may be unpopular now, but will be good for them in the long run. Given the dedication we put forth for our children, decisions that may truly have an impact on their long term successes are particularly stressful. At the head of the list of major decisions we make for our children are two important school related choices: late entry into kindergarten and grade retention for a struggling student.

The educational system in America was simpler 150 years ago, when children attended a one room school house. One teacher would assess the abilities of her students and they could progress at their own rate. Education delivery changed with the industrial revolution in the early 1900's. Students were then grouped together by age and tended to progress together through school. Over the past 20 years, schools have pushed for "standards" or requirements needed to be met in order to promote a child to the next grade. This triggered an important debate over the relative benefits of grade retention. Even more recently, and especially in more affluent communities, there has been an increasing trend towards later enrollment in kindergarten. Parents, hoping to get their child more prepared for school, are entering their student into kindergarten as a late-five or early-six-year old instead of a traditional late-four or early-five-year old.

Parents seek guidance in their decision making process from educators and other parents, but often come to a conclusion without an understanding of the actual research on these issues. There is a growing amount of literature from the past 20 years about grade retention and late school entry which may surprise you.



Late School Entry

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that late school entry, also known as academic red-shirting, occurs at the rate of about 9% per year among kindergarten-age children. Parents tend to wait more often when enrolling

their sons than their daughters. Red-shirting has traditionally been more common in affluent communities, because delayed school entry is less of an option in middle-class families where both parents have to work.

Proponents of late entry describe the "gift of a year," which allows for cognitive, physical, and emotional maturity. Since development is an uneven process, a child's motor-skills, cognition, language abilities and social-skills generally mature at different rates. Therefore, an intelligent five-year-old may not have mastered all of the skills needed for educational readiness. For example, despite strong cognitive abilities, he or she may not be able to sit still during "circle time" or know how to initiate play with peers. Children not developmentally ready in these areas have often been told to wait a year before starting kindergarten, but the research contradicts this idea. Numerous studies have found that for most children, the benefits of academic red-shirting may not outweigh the long-term negatives. Children who were among the youngest when they entered kindergarten may be a little bit behind academically at first, but by the third grade, there was really no academic difference between those children who were among the youngest and those kids who were among the oldest in the class.

When making the decision about late entry, one must also consider the issues associated with being the oldest in a class. Many studies show negative outcomes associated with being older in later grades. Older students, when compared to younger students who achieve the same level of academic

Continued on page 30

Late Kindergarten Entry and Grade Retention

From page 28

performance, are more likely to demonstrate health-compromising behaviors, including smoking, alcohol and drug usage, driving while drinking, early onset of sexual activity and alcohol use during sexual relations. Older children in their class are also more likely to show signs of emotional distress, including suicidal intentions and violent behaviors.

While there is no research suggesting long term benefits for children who enter kindergarten late, evidence suggests that certain populations may not be as negatively affected. Boys who are small for their age, socially immature, with positive self-esteem, and who are only minimally behind academically, tend to be more immune to the negatives of red-shirting. The last point, that children must be only minimally behind, deserves emphasis. Delaying entry for a student with substantial delays should never be done in lieu of providing needed treatments and therapies.

Grade Retention

Grade retention, also known as repeating a grade, occurs more frequently than academic

red-shirting. Nationally, nearly one-third of all students repeat a grade prior to entering high school. Children with factors related to socioeconomic disadvantage (i.e. race, single parents, poverty, and low parental education) as well as attention dysfunction, and birthdays that occur late during the school year, are most commonly associated with grade retention.

The National Association of School Psychologists reports that "the practice of retaining children in grade has been shown, through many years of research, to be ineffective in meeting the needs of children who are academically delayed. Initial achievement gains that occur during the year immediately following retention dissipate. The consistent trend across many research studies is that achievement declines within two to three years of retention, such that retained children either do no better or perform more poorly than similar groups of promoted children. In addition, it is found that children who are the most academically delayed are the most likely to be harmed by retention, because, for these students, special education assistance is more critical than repetition.

Retained students naturally become the older students in their class, which, as pointed out earlier, is associated with health compromising behaviors and emotional distress. But, as with late school entry, there does seem to be one student type that is not negatively affected by retention. Children that missed a significant amount of schooling—due to an illness, not a learning disorder—may benefit from a year to "catch up."

Research about late entry into school and grade retention at all levels and across studies is based on group data. Like any group study there are outliers, children who might fare much better or worse than the reported statistical average. Therefore, while the presented data is heavily skewed in one direction, when making a decision about a child's future, parents need to take into consideration their individual child and the school resources that are available. Children that have more significant delays require intervention not delayed entry or retention. Request psycho-educational testing from the school, to understand your child's educational needs, and seek early expert diagnosis if you have concerns.